
終末なにしてますか？
忙しいですか？
救ってもらっていいですか？
#04
Do you have what THE END? Are you busy? Shall you save XXX?
Author Kareno
枯野瑛
Illustration ue
角川スニーカー文庫



あのおとーさんの恋人になるひとは
すごく大変だと思う。
だってアレ、すごく典型的な、
恋人より家族を大事にする人だから。

うん、わかってる。
おとーさんが一番大切にするのは、
一番の娘である、私。
きっと、あのひとのことだから、
死ぬまでそれは変わらない。
そのことがすごく嬉しくて、
……ちょっとだけ、罪悪感。


【剣才の達人】
ヴィレム・クメシュ
【C国の姫勇者】
リーリア・アスプレイ
【雇われ払う鉄槌】
カイヤ・カルトラン
【爆発あくま】
エミッサ・ホードヴィン
【初回買入店の秘蔵っ子】
スウォン・カンデル
【全空の覇者】
ナヴルテリ・ティゴザック
【徒手武技収集人】
ヒルグラム・モト

終末なにしてますか？
忙しいですか？
救ってもらって
いいですか？

#04
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Chapter 1: Beyond Despair



Maybe, just maybe there's a chance, she thought. She wanted to believe in miracles. But reality moved forward, indifferent to her wishes. A high speed airship of the Winged Guard retrieved one corpse from the land, the corpse which, just a few days ago,

had been Kutori Nota Seniolis.

Naigrat exited the room and shut the door behind her. Lacking the strength to move any farther, she leaned her back against the wall of the corridor and slid down to the floor. The thunderous rumbling of the spell incinerator shook her entire body, making her feel as if she were a baby being rocked around in its mother's womb. Naigrat quickly shook that image out of her head. It had no place here. There were no lives coming into creation here, only lives already lost and lives which would be lost soon enough.

Naigrat was on board a medium sized Winged Guard patrol ship which mainly watched over the area around the 20th Floating Island.

"It must be painful to look at for you," a giant Reptrace, the one who had called Naigrat to the ship in the first place, said in a deep, heavy voice. "In most cases, a fairy soldier lost in battle does not leave behind a corpse. They shatter into beads of light and melt into the wind... so it is as you said.

Kutori was no longer a fairy."

"I guess so," Naigrat responded half heartedly, her gaze still on the floor.

In the room behind them was the thing which used to be Kutori. Whether she had been crushed, hacked, pierced, scratched, or perhaps all of them, no would would ever know, but innumerable wounds had mutilated her body to the point where it hardly resembled its original shape. In addition, ruptured joints and tendons, probably the result of her forcing her body to act past its limits, had damaged the body even more than the external wounds.

When Naigrat saw it, both her hands immediately went up to cover her mouth in a desperate attempt to shove the wails of despair back down her throat. At the same time, tears began to overflow out of her eyes. She didn't bother trying to hide them. After all, unlike some of the demon races, she only had two arms.

"She really did fight hard..."

But being the two armed Troll that she was, Naigrat could immediately decipher the messages left behind by the condition of the body's flesh. She could tell how intense of a battle that the corpse had gone through, and how intense the emotions it had fought with were. The body most likely didn't try to stop Kutori as she fought. As the girl drew closer to death, the Venom inside her would have blazed brighter and brighter. Such power would have been more than enough to force her body to continue its reckless fight. Even as her flesh split, bones fractured, and blood poured out, she never stopped throwing every last drop of life inside her against her enemies.

"What will you do about the funeral? Demon style?" the giant Reptrace asked.

Regul Aire, being home to many different races and cultures, and consequently many different views on death, also has various ways of handling the deceased. Burning the body, burying it, exposing it to the wind and letting birds eat it, soaking it in

chemicals to preserve it, letting the local government retrieve it on trash day… the list goes on and on. The demon style funeral is relatively common. It involves hiring a qualified Troll to eat the corpse of the deceased. The idea is that a living being which survived by consuming other life should pass on by serving as fuel for another living being, as if part of one giant cycle.

"… no, I don't think so."

Naigrat had the necessary qualifications to perform that role. If she wished to, she could have easily gotten a burial for Kutori approved. But still, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Every fairy up until now passed away unmourned, simply turning into fragments of light before fading into the wind. Even if Kutori was special to her, Naigrat felt it would be wrong to make her the only exception.

"That meat is empty. I don't know too much about Venom or souls or whatever, but I can tell that the meat has nothing left to pass on. I can't eat it."

"Hmph."

Their conversation came to a pause. Waves of emotion still crashed violently inside her, but the shaking in Naigrat's voice and the tears streaming from her eyes had managed to subside. She stood up.

"... by the way, what happened to the other two? They fell close to Kutori, did they not? Were they not found as well?"

"About that..." The Reptrace gave Naigrat a troubled look. "I have confirmed news and unconfirmed news. Which would you like to hear first?"

Isn't is supposed to be good news and bad news? Naigrat thought. Because in that case, she would have told him to tell her the good news and then shut up. Right now, she didn't want to hear anything that would make her mood even worse.

"... I'll go with the confirmed news first."

"The 1st Beast appeared. That is the reason why the investigation of the site was stopped midway, and also the reason why we cannot gain any more

information."

"Is that strong?"

"That is unknown. There is not a single person in recorded history who has fought against it."

"So..."

"It is not possible to fight it. All who approach the 1st Beast are simply reduced to sand. Perhaps the Beast does not even carry malice or ill intentions. But just by existing, it poses a deadly threat to all life. No one can approach it. No one can touch it. Therefore, no one can defeat it. One cannot even start a battle. In other words, we cannot even search for traces of the remaining two, Willem Kumesh and Nephren Ruq Insania."

"I see..." Naigrat, her back still against the wall, embraced herself tightly with both arms. "So that's the confirmed news. What about the other one?"

She urged the Reptrace on, not expecting anything in particular. Naigrat was already at rock bottom. No matter what words came out of his mouth, they

couldn't make her any more depressed than she already was. That was the only thing she was confident in at the moment.

"The Great Sage searched for Willem's whereabouts with an ancient technique. If I recall correctly, it detects heartbeats or something of the sort. It can seek out a living being up to the very ends of the earth."

"Huh?"

Naigrat was getting a little confused. When Limeskin mentioned the 'Great Sage', he was probably referring to the founder of Regul Aire itself. The over five hundred year old man versed in ancient techniques and possessing deep knowledge. The past, present, and future guardian of Regul Aire. A legendary figure found in countless children's picture books and school textbooks. And apparently, Willem's old friend. Naigrat didn't believe it when he first told her, but apparently it was true. So it didn't sound too surprising that the Great Sage would try searching for Willem's

whereabouts. But the real question was…

“Seek out… a living being?”

“The results of the search said that Willem is alive somewhere on the land.”

“……”

Naigrat gulped. No. That wasn’t possible. But. Wait. No. But…

“We cannot jump to conclusions. If even the ancient techniques of the wise Great Sage yield a result as vague as ‘somewhere’, there must be something off. But still…”

But still, there was a possibility. An ancient technique for seeking out living beings had yielded results. That was fact. And they could not help but see a small sliver of hope in that fact.

“That warrior may still be standing on a battlefield somewhere.”

“Ah…”

A strange voice escaped Naigrat’s lips. Before she

knew it, the tears that had finally stopped just minutes ago and the wailing she had tried so desperately to suppress both rushed forth again, for a completely different reason now. This time, the Troll's mere two arms could not stop either one.

Naigrat understood. This was the unconfirmed news. It wasn't certain that he was still alive. And of course, they couldn't assume Nephren was alive with him either. But still, she couldn't stop her heart from clutching onto that tiny fragment of hope.

Naigrat knew. Despair results from severed hope. The only way to avoid that pain is to not have hope in the first place. She understood that logic, but she couldn't resist the feelings of joy welling up inside her. She couldn't help but chase after the faint glimmer of light beyond the dark shroud of despair.

The spell incinerator shook the airship back and forth as if it were one giant cradle. And within, a Troll woman cried and cried, as if she were one large baby.

Chapter 2: Inside a Sweet and Gentle Dream



Part 1: Father and Daughter

Almaria Duffner never got the chance to see her mother's face. By the time she could make sense of the world around her, her family had already only consisted of her and her father. But she never got the chance to get to know her father too well either. He hardly ever visited his own home. During the day, he went to his job at a money exchange business, and at night, he visited his lover. Occasionally he would return to their apartment, silently confirm that Almaria was still alive, and leave her a minimal amount of money on the table before leaving again. That was the extent of the communication between Almaria and her father. So the young girl effectively lived all by herself, not relying on anyone else, and not relied on by anyone else.

One day, when Almaria was just seven years old, her father involved himself in some sort of crime and got stabbed to death by his accomplice. Of course,

that meant Almaria could no longer live in her apartment. She was originally supposed to be moved to a city operated facility, but an old man, who had been investigating her father's crime, stepped in. He claimed that their encounter was some kind of fate, and offered to take her to his own orphanage. The guards and officials present didn't particularly have any reason to object, and Almaria herself, still overwhelmed at the sudden turn of events, didn't have the composure to express her own opinion.

The old man brought the young girl to a ramshackle wooden building.

"This is your new home starting today. And they are your new family," the old man told her, but Almaria's brain hardly registered the words.

To the young girl, home meant that cramped apartment room, and family meant that perpetually absent father. She couldn't comprehend that, from that day on, those two things were supposed to be replaced by completely new places and faces.

As Almaria stood confused next to the old man, a young boy came running up to them.

“You have a new sister,” the old man told him.

The boy peered at the young girl and said, “What’s with your boring face?”

The girl shot a brief glare at the boy before averting her eyes. She wasn’t exactly in the mood to talk to anyone, especially to a boy who insulted her after just meeting for the first time.

“Hey, how old are you?” the boy asked.

Almaria ignored him.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m still your elder around here.”

Ignored.

“Listen up, okay? Now that you’re here, you’re part of the family. Since I’ve been here longer, I’m your older brother.”

Ignored.

“What’s with you? You’re no fun.”

After a while of that, the boy eventually gave up talking to the girl and walked off. The girl gave his back another glare before returning her gaze to the ground. She didn't want him to mind her. She didn't need family, and even if they tried to suddenly push one onto her, she wouldn't know how to act. All they had to do was leave her alone, and she would manage on her own just fine. Beside her, the old man shrugged his shoulders with a sigh.

That night, Almaria fell ill. It only seemed natural, given her sudden change in environment, accumulated stress, and immature body and mind. A high fever rendered her unable to leave her bed. Her head felt heavy, every breath hurt, and pain filled her chest. In her dim state of consciousness, Almaria thought that she might die. However, she understood logically that such thoughts only resulted because her mind was passing through a moment of weakness. And besides, a part of her felt like it would be fine even if she really did die then and there. Almaria never had a particularly strong

will to live. If her life would only continue to be meaningless, it wouldn't be so bad to end it sooner than later.

As those thoughts fluttered through her mind, something cold was suddenly placed on her forehead. Her hazy consciousness couldn't work its senses well enough to tell that the object was a wet towel, but it felt a little nice. Just a little.

"Hmph. Ignoring me then making me take care of you."

Almaria could barely hear the voice talking right beside her. The owner of the voice, whoever it was, frequently swapped the towel on her forehead. When the water in his bucket grew warm, he went outside into the cold darkness to fetch new water from the well. As the night wore on, Almaria's consciousness gradually cleared up. Her mind could vaguely register that someone was sitting next to her.

"Whoa, it's already so late," that someone said in a surprised voice. "I better get to bed soon, or I won't

be able to wake up in the morning."

The person stood up. Almaria couldn't make out what he was saying, but she understood that he was about to leave. Her hand spontaneously stretched out, as if acting all on its own. Her fingertips weakly clutched the unknown person's sleeve.

"... father..." Her mouth moved all on its own too. "... don't go, father..."

She spoke with such a soft, trembling voice that Almaria almost couldn't hear herself. The person about to leave paused, bewildered. After a moment, he sat back down next to her.

"Don't worry. Your father's right here. He's not going anywhere."

Almaria knew it was a lie. Her father was already dead. Even when alive, he hardly talked to her at all, much less comfort her with gentle words. Yet still, the girl clung onto that lie. She felt around in the dark for that father's hand and gripped it with all her strength. She wanted him to stay beside her.

She wanted to depend on him. She wanted that fake father to show her genuine kindness. Before long, the father's warm hands gripped the girl's in return.

"Father..."

"Right here."

When Almaria called, she received an answer. That made her happy. When she wanted someone to be there, someone was there. Perhaps the very fact that such a simple thing could make her happy brought her more happiness than anything. With somewhat distorted thoughts running through her mind, Almaria savored the warmth enveloping her hand.

A few days later, the young boy from earlier talked about that night to Almaria. According to him, incidents like her's were not unusual. New family members often fell ill at the stress of losing their parents and suddenly moving to a new environment. The boy had seen many such cases.

And moreover, it wasn't unusual for the ill children to call for their mother or father. It was only natural that they felt lonely after losing everyone they knew and moving to a place filled with strangers. It would be impossible to tough it out alone. So when they're lying in bed at night, with their bodies and minds both in a state of weakness, calls to their parents escape their lips. It wasn't unusual. Everyone at the orphanage had been through it at least once.

So the boy told the girl not to think of it as embarrassing or pitiful. He told her to forget about it, and that he would forget about it as well.

"... no."

Almaria refused so assertively that it even surprised herself. But how could she forget? She felt so warm. So reassured. So happy. She couldn't throw away such a precious memory for some stupid reason like 'it's not unusual' or 'everyone does it'.

"I'm never going to forget... father."

The boy looked annoyed. "I told you to call me your

big brother. I don't want to be a father at this age…" he grumbled.

It was true that the boy didn't have the dignity or presence of authority characteristic of a father, but still…

"But Willem, you don't seem like a big brother at all."

"And I don't seem like a father at all either!"

"That's different."

"No it's not! Why do you keep insisting on calling me father!?"

"Why? Well…" Almaria thought for a bit. "That's a secret." She winked and stuck her tongue out teasingly.

Almaria opened her eyes.

The ceiling hazily loomed in her field of view within the darkness. She heard bird calls from beyond the window. *Dawn must be close*, she thought.

"Nn…"

It felt like she had a very long dream, and that she still wasn't fully awake. It wasn't a bad dream... probably. At the very least, it wasn't that nightmare she often got as a young child. Her head felt heavy. Unable to think clearly, she got up from her bed and put on her slippers. Then, still in a dream like state, she left the room and walked down the hallway, causing the wooden floor underneath her feet to creak loudly as she went. And then...

"Ah."

She found someone lying on the worn out couch. Familiar black hair, gentle facial features, a slender frame...

"... father?"

At that moment, her mind suddenly cleared up all at once, like how the light of dawn sweeps away the mist of night. She remembered who she was, what she came to this room to do, and what she needed to do next.

"Oh no, oh no."

With the rapid pitter patter of her slippers, she scampered back down the hallway. Mornings in the orphanage are always busy. There was much to do. She needed to open the windows before the sun rose, prepare breakfast before the little kids woke up, and she wanted to make that breakfast a little more extravagant for a certain family member's unexpected return. The day ahead of her was shaping up to be the busiest one in a while.

"At least tell me before you come home, silly father."

Sooner or later, he would wake up, and the first words out of his mouth would probably be 'I'm hungry'. It always went like that. She doubted that he was genuinely hungry every time, but whenever father came home he would ask for something to eat, almost as if he were trying to make up for all the days he had missed.

"Alright. Let's do this."

Almaria smiled and took out her favorite apron.

Part 2: The Foreigners

Willem knew he could no longer fight. He realized that he would die if he ever tried to stand on the battlefield. He even learned to see the bright side of it: while the girls went off to fight, he could see them off in the safety of home.

Yet when the airship Plantaginesta fell under attack, Willem chose to fight so naturally. He chose to leave sleeping Kutori's side, set his Venom ablaze, and confront the enemy. When he met Lantolq on the battlefield, she said that he was trying to commit suicide with Kutori as an excuse. Her description couldn't have expressed his actions at the time more accurately.

Willem wanted to die out there. He wanted to throw away everything except his resolve to protect the girls. He used the battlefield to satisfy his selfish wishes, stomping out the part of him that wanted to simply wait for the girls' return.

He did all that he could, and even some things he shouldn't have been able to do. For the first time in a while, his Venom ignited to full potential. He heard the sounds of his own blood boiling and flesh burning. If he was going to die fighting no matter what, there was no point in holding back. And once he could no longer fight, neither pain nor suffering would matter. He went all out.

And then, his wish came true. The Second Enchanted Weapons Technician of the Winged Guard and manager of the fairy warehouse, Willem Kumesh, lost his life during the intense battle. Or at least, that's what supposedly happened.

The birds were humming their pretty little songs. A pleasant morning had dawned.

Sitting on the roof of the orphanage, Willem stifled a yawn. Then, with slightly watery eyes, he surveyed the area. The familiar town before him looked exactly as he remembered it. The patch of green in the distance marked Adam's farm. In front of it stood the chapel. The brick buildings of various

colors nearby it were cheap apartments, and towards the edge of the cluster a red flag waving in the wind signified the Adventurer's Guild. And further beyond that, past the irrigation ditch, lay the center of Gomag city.

Pillars of smoke rose from a few of the chimneys in sight. The residents of the town were beginning to prepare breakfast. The humans of the world were getting ready to live another day.

Of course, there was no way all that was real. The town before Willem's eyes, along with the Emnetwyte flourishing within, perished long, long ago. Over five hundred years ago, according to the history books. The invaders named the 'Beasts' appeared right in the middle of the humans' imperial capital, within the king's palace. They were terrifyingly strong, even more terrifyingly numerous, and also swift. They devoured the world at a pace unmatched by any army to ever walk the land. In just a few days, many of the main cities and states comprising the empire disappeared.

But not only the Emnetwyte vanished. The Beasts consumed all in sight without discrimination. Grass and trees, animals and insects, Elves and all the other races who stood in the Beasts' way. They laid waste to everything, as if simply existing were an unforgivable crime to them.

The real earth was now no more than a withered wasteland, where the only things that moved were ashen sandstorms. The few survivors of the Beasts' fierce rampage had long ago escaped to floating islands in the sky under the leadership of the Great Sage and reforged civilization anew. Those races not fortunate enough to have gotten the chance to seek refuge were, of course, extinct.

"Damn it." Willem swore quietly enough that no one else heard.

Humans were long gone, along with his home town. Willem repeated that to himself over and over. The scenery spreading out before his eyes was no more than something like a diary. It roused old memories and a nostalgic feeling in him, but existed only in

the past. The place he needed to return home to wasn't here. It was up there, faraway in the sky.

"It's big." Nephren took a seat next to him and started talking in the Regul Aire common language. "What number island is this?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"It looks like you know where this is."

Nephren's statement was oddly difficult to either confirm or deny. "This is Gomag city, part of the empire. The building below us is the Foreigner Commemorative Orphanage, built and managed by the honorable 18th generation Regal Brave Nils D Foreigner himself."

Nephren's face, which rarely showed any expression, became clouded with doubt. "A Brave managing an orphanage? Never heard that before... but anyways, if we're in the empire, that means this is the 6th Island?"

"Don't know about you, but I've never heard of a Brave in Regul Aire. This is the land."

Nephren's look grew even more troubled. It was slightly amusing.

"But there aren't any Braves on the land anymore either, right?" she asked.

"Well that's the problem. Everything on the land was destroyed five hundred years ago," Willem answered as he looked around. "But this is without doubt the exact same hometown from my memories."

Following suit, Nephren also took a look at their surroundings. "... so this is the ancient land."

"That's right."

"Is there another land below this one?"

Nephren's question sounded a bit strange, but Willem understood what she wanted to say. Having lived in Regul Aire her entire life, she had grown used to the floating islands and their limited spaces. If you walk a bit you run into the edge, and if you look down from there you see the ashen land below. That was common sense to her. The concept of a

vast fertile landscape stretching out endlessly in all directions, while perhaps vaguely understandable, probably far surpassed anything she had ever imagined.

“That mountain looks pretty far away,” Nephren said while pointing off in the distance.

“It sure is. From here, I’d say it’s about the length of the entire 68th Island away.”

“And beyond that mountain, the land keeps going?”

“Yep, it keeps going. About two days away by carriage there’s a pretty big town.” Willem laid out a mental map of the empire. “After that it’s grain fields for a while, then you cross a river and there’s a huge forest and then a mountain range… after that it becomes a warzone… contested territory with the Elves.”

“… it makes me feel a little uneasy.”

“Ah, I know what you’re talking about. That’s what happens when you try to think about something so ridiculously large.”

“But the land already fell into ruin.”

“That’s right.”

“So what’s all this?”

“This is probably…”

Willem looked down at his chest. He could see the faint glow of Venom emanating out of the metal fragment hanging from his neck, the language Talisman which had the power to transmit will itself through words. It only required a small amount of Venom from the user to activate. It was truly a convenient little gadget, but it had some drawbacks.

Like lies or insults which are harmless when kept to oneself, there are attacks which only become effective once transmitted to the target. Understanding every language means that all such attacks can hit you directly. As long as Willem’s Talisman stayed activated, he would accept all incoming messages without any sort of screening process, considerably reducing his resistance to any

sort of mental interference attack. He had completely forgotten about that since it posed no threat while living in Regul Aire.

The Talisman was now activated against Willem's will. What did that signify?

"... it's probably a dream."

Nephren shot him a cold glare.

"Wait, no no, not just any old dream. I mean we're the targets of some kind of attack."

Back when Willem roamed the land as a Quasi Brave, he encountered a few Devils who used such tricks. The Devils were a race devoted to corrupting the Emnetwyte. They tempted humans with various schemes in an attempt to get their target to throw away his self control or faith. One such scheme was a mental attack which utilized a dream world.

"A fantasy world built on the victim's memories, made to replicate reality with almost perfect accuracy. The goal is to make the victim into a permanent resident of the imaginary world. Be

careful. The second we lose the desire to escape from here, they win," Willem explained.

"So this dream looks so much like the ancient land because..."

"They probably thought I would fall just by seeing this place."

In actuality it was quite an effective attack. Just by sitting on the roof and looking around, a warm and nostalgic feeling overcame Willem, almost seeming to melt his heart. But as long as he recognized that it was in fact an attack, and not reality, he could resist.

"A dream world..." Nephren mumbled and pinched her own cheek. "Ow. Is this really a dream?" Faint traces of tears began to appear in her eyes.

"Well the whole point is that it's a dream you never wake up from, so we won't be able to break out so easily."

"So what happens if we just do nothing?"

"Their goal is to make us complete residents of this world. To accomplish that, they're going to tamper

with the world and force us to respond."

"Play with the world?"

"They're the creators of this world. Besides interfering with us directly, they can do pretty much anything they want using our memories. There were a few species of Devils who specialized in this kind of temptation. They each had their own methods. The Aeshma would gradually kill off all the people in the dream, the Bufas would attack directly, and the Mammon would give you loads of money and jewels. I also fought with a Succubus once..."

The Succubus would corrupt its target mainly by satisfying sexual desires. So the dream world Willem got trapped in during his fight was overflowing with those sort of temptations. It was... well, Willem didn't exactly want to explain the details to Nephren. (For a little while after that fight, he couldn't bring himself to make eye contact with Leila or Emissa.)

"Anyways, moving on..."

“What did the Succubus do?” Nephren asked, much to Willem’s chagrin.

“Moving on…” He forcefully changed the subject. “I don’t know who our enemy is, but his target is almost definitely me.”

Willem found it hard to imagine that the Nephren sitting beside him was a fake. She didn’t belong in the setting of the dream, so most likely the real Nephren just happened to get caught up in this mess along with him.

“So basically as long as I still have the desire to escape, our enemy will try to interfere with this world in order to break my spirit. That’s our chance. We need to figure out who he is and strike back.”

“Do we need to strike back?” Nephren asked.

“Of course. If we just sit around we’ll never get out of here.”

“Do we need to escape?”

……

“If we leave here, it won’t be long before we both die.”

Nephren was probably right. As Willem and Nephren lay dying on the ashen sand, someone had captured their souls and brought them into this dream world. That meant there was a high possibility that their physical bodies had already become corpses in the real world. Or maybe their time spent in the dream world only amounted to a mere fraction of a second in the real world. In that case, when they escaped the dream they would return to their almost dead selves, and then die a few seconds later.

“We’ll never return home,” Nephren said.

“… that’s not the problem,” Willem said, half to himself. “Don’t let weird thoughts get into your head. If you lose the will to escape, you’ll become a resident of this dream world for eternity. Just because I’m our enemy’s target doesn’t mean you’re safe.”

Nephren nodded and fell silent.

I wonder what's wrong with her, Willem thought. Nephren had always been a rather strange girl, but the strangeness that Willem sensed in her now was a different kind of strange. She had her usual absentminded expression, but the emotions residing deeper within her eyes told a different story. Something was troubling her.

"Faather!" Someone called out to him from below in the language of the empire.

Just by hearing that voice, Willem felt a tightening sensation in his chest. Looking down, he spotted Almaria, or rather something which took on the appearance of Almaria, standing outside the front door waving to him. The sensation in his chest turned into pain. Almaria. That face. That voice. When he lost them, he had grieved like never before. He had suffered so much trying to accept it. And while he was never able to forget that pain, finally being able to lessen it had saved him more than his saviors ever realized. Yet now, she was there, looking at him with that face, calling to him

with that voice, as if to deny his entire agonizing struggle over the past two years.

“What are you doing up there? Breakfast is ready!”

“What’s she saying?” Nephren asked, unable to understand the Emnetwyte’s language.

“It’s breakfast time. We can think more after we eat.”

Nephren nodded.

“Don’t worry. Almaria’s cooking is delicious, at least as good as Naigrat’s,” Willem said. “Well, except for meat.” The Trolls’ knowledge of and devotion to cooking meats far surpassed those of the Emnetwyte. Even though Almaria was a great cook, she could never win against a Troll when it came to meat, and Willem wouldn’t want her to be able to either. That would just be creepy.

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

“Hm? Then what are you worried about?”

Willem tried asking casually, but Nephren didn’t

answer. She silently ignited her Venom, sprouted whitish gray illusionary wings on her back, and flew down from the roof. The fairies' wings don't have physical substance and also get the privilege of ignoring the laws of physics. Nephren's wings carried her down to the ground without even a single flap, then disappeared just as quickly as they appeared initially.

Almaria let out a scream. Being an ordinary civilian, and not a brave, adventurer, or chevalier, she probably wasn't used to seeing flying girls. With a sigh, Willem scratched his head and ignited his own Venom. Then, leaving behind an explosive sound, he leaped into the air. His empowered legs propelled him upwards with a force which far surpassed what a normal human would be capable of. After slightly adjusting his stance midair, Willem landed right next to Nephren. His shoes left a deep imprint in the ground as they kicked up a cloud of dirt.

"Willem!?"

"I'm fine."

He reassured the worried Nephren and checked his body's condition. Nowhere hurt in particular. He tried jumping up and down a few times in place, but still no problem arose. The Venom was properly invigorating Willem's body.

I see. Willem deduced that he and Nephren had retained all the abilities they possessed in the real world while losing any damage afflicting their physical bodies. And without all the wounds in his body, Willem could now freely use the power he once held as a Quasi Brave.

"Oh yeah, about earlier..." Nephren said.

"Hm?"

"You never told me what kind of dream the Succubus makes."

"Forget about it."

On the outskirts of Gomag city there stood a lone building. Bearing the official name of the Foreigner Commemorative Orphanage, it was funded and built by the great 18th generation Regal Brave

himself, Nils D Foreigner. Well, it had a fantastic name and founding history, but the same could not be said for anything else about it.

If you had to describe it in one word, 'old' might have been an apt response. In two words, 'very old'. It was a two story wooden building whose walls and ceiling showed clear signs of both age and the incompetence of the novice carpenters who had worked on them over the years. Before Nils purchased the property, it was a run down preschool about to be demolished, so it boasted just as long a history as any of the stone buildings around town. But unlike them, it had a woefully unstable foundation which seemed ready to fly away at any moment should just one storm strike.

At the time, there were 21 children living in that privately managed orphanage. They lived through each day robustly and boisterously, free from the chains of useless adults. Willem was one resident of the orphanage, although for about five years he barely ever got the chance to return home. His

training to become a Brave, and his missions once he became a Quasi Brave, didn't leave him much free time. But still, he was a proud resident of the orphanage.

As they all gathered for breakfast, many of the newer arrivals at the orphanage took one look at the older man and got scared out of their wits. But as soon as Willem showed them that smile of his, they relaxed. These kind of moments were the only times when that face of his, which lacked any solemnity whatsoever, came in handy. The older kids (mainly around 10 years old), who already knew Willem, gave him a warm welcome.

"Hey! Father, you're back!"

"Hey, teach me how to use a sword! Remember? You promised to teach me when you got back."

"Where did you fight this time? Did you kill a lot of Elves?"

They all gathered around Willem and pestered him with questions.

“Hey guys! Glad to see you’re all doing well.”

One by one, Willem hugged the kids, rubbed their cheeks, and rustled their hair. As he went around, the children shouted in excitement.

“Everyone settle down. It’s rude to cause such a fuss during mealtime, isn’t it?”

After receiving a scolding from Almaria, the kids all took their seats and ate.

A bitter salad with sweet and sour dressing. That combination of flavors, which Willem had almost forgotten, gave his stomach a little surprise.

The things he wanted to protect. The place he longed to return home to. The people he wanted to meet once more. The voices he wanted to hear once more. The reason he continued to wield his sword in battle despite his lack of talent. Willem couldn’t truly say it was all here. But much of that which he once lost, grieved over, and finally gave up on ever reclaiming was unmistakably right in front of him, in the form of a crowd of children. Yet none of it

was real. To allow the imposters to move him emotionally would constitute betrayal to the real Almaria and the real children who all passed away 527 years ago.

But just by being there and talking to them, Willem couldn't help but get emotional. He could feel the tears coming on again. He wanted to give them all another hug. What would happen if he stopped trying to suppress those impulses? How would Almaria react if he suddenly gave her a great big hug?

Wait wait! They're watching! The little kids are all watching!

At first, she would probably say something like that, but she wouldn't resist physically. But sooner or later...

Geez. You've grown bigger, but inside you're still just a child.

She would accept it. Then, with a slightly disgusted face, but with a soft and gentle voice, she would hug

him back and comfort him. Willem easily predicted it all in his head, but the imaginary scene made him a little sad.

“Father,” Almaria called to him.

“What?”

“Why are you making faces? It’s pretty creepy.”

Willem was truly hurt.

“Whenever you come home it’s always sudden like this,” Almaria said with a hint of annoyance in her voice. “Grandpa was always like that too. Now, I get that Braves are busy and all, but I think there’s a limit on how much you can use that excuse, right?”

Even though Almaria seemed to be complaining, she maintained a cheerful expression and light footsteps. Willem knew that often times she had trouble being honest with herself, so he didn’t take her complaints to heart. Sitting in his chair, he took another look at Almaria. She seemed a little smaller than he remembered. After a moment’s thought, he soon realized why. The reason almost made him

want to laugh.

The ridiculously long period of 500 years sandwiched between had messed up his sense of time, but on that night when Willem last saw Almaria, he was sixteen years old. After his slumber, he spent close to two years in Regul Aire. During that time, he grew taller. Over five hundred and twenty seven years, Willem only underwent two years worth of change. Physically, he simply grew from sixteen to eighteen. But Almaria hadn't changed one bit. Willem was merely seeing their new height difference. And that also served as clear proof that the Almaria here was a fake.

"... say, do you notice anything strange about me today?" Willem asked.

"Yeah," Almaria answered.

"What?"

"The fact that you're asking that question. Also, you're making the same face that Falco makes when he's crying after having a nightmare, and you look

kind of nervous even though you're home."

Is that it? Willem's thoughts turned bitter. Earlier, he noticed that Almaria seemed smaller than usual. Flipping perspectives, Almaria should have noticed that Willem had grown quite a bit. The real Almaria would have without doubt noticed that and pointed it out. The fact that she didn't do so only provided more evidence that she was an imposter.

"Father." A girl pulled on his sleeve. "Who's that?"

Nephren, although unable to understand their language, could still see that everyone had turned to look at her. She gave Willem a quizzical look.

"You fought up in the north this time, right? Is she from one of those countries?"

"Ah..." Willem thought for a bit, but couldn't come up with a decent explanation. "Yeah, that."

"What's going on?" Nephren asked in the common tongue of Regul Aire.

"Someone asked who you are. I can't exactly tell them the truth, so play along."

"... got it." Nephren nodded and returned to her meal.

"She has pretty hair. It's like a little off from silver," someone remarked.

"Ah... yeah."

Among the fairies, who often possessed hair with strikingly bright colors, Nephren was relatively normal. Thanks to that, while people did notice her hair, they couldn't tell right away that she wasn't human.

"So what's her story?" Almaria asked as she brought over another bowl of salad. "Since you brought her over here suddenly, at first I thought she might need to be taken care of, but earlier she flew, didn't she?"

"Ah..."

The orphanage operated with support from the city of Gomag, but the children were not all residents of Gomag. They came from all over, picked up by Willem's master, also the founder of the orphanage

and their ‘grandfather’, during his battles.

“No… she’s more like… my comrade.”

“Comrade?” Almaria repeated suspiciously. “Comrade in what?”

“A fellow Quasi Brave. What else could that mean?”

“Brave!?”

“Even though she’s smaller than us!?”

“Really!?”

All the boys immediately turned their attention to Nephren, who drew back in bewilderment. After all, she was raised in the all female fairy orphanage. The only men besides Willem she ever came close to were the Reptrace guys in the army. This was probably her first time drawing the attention of boys of a similar race.

“Hey, let’s have a duel!”

“Hey, no fair! I get to go first!”

The boys grabbed onto both of Nephren’s arms and began dragging her down the hallway.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but it’s like there’s a bunch of Collons,” Nephren mumbled.

Her voice trailed off as she moved farther away, then eventually became inaudible to Willem. *That’s a pretty good comparison*, he thought.

“Hey, at least say ‘thank you’ when you’re finished eating!” Almaria yelled down the hallway. A few of the boys returned an energetic ‘thank you!’. “Geez, how rude. Anyways, she’s really small… but I’m guessing she can wield one of those big swords you showed me earlier?”

“Yep. Despite her body size, she’s far more qualified to be a Brave than I am. Oh, and also, she looks small, but she’s around your age,” Willem said.

“What, really? I thought she was about the same age as Nanette.”

Sitting at the corner of the table, Nanette, who just turned ten, nodded vigorously. Willem could definitely see why they got that impression. Nephren was pretty small. However, he decided to

not tell her about their little conversation.

Faather.

"... hm?" A voice seemed to call to him out of the blue. "Did someone just say something?"

"Huh? I said that she looks about the same age as Nanette," Almaria responded.

"No, after that. It sounded kinda faraway..."

"I also thought she was the same age as me!" Nanette raised her hand and said energetically. That probably wasn't what Willem heard either.

Oh well. Maybe it was just his imagination. In any case, he couldn't afford to let his guard down. It was shaping up to be a more troublesome dream than he originally thought. Reminding himself that he was in the clutches of an unknown enemy, and not in the safety of home, Willem focused his mind and sharpened his vigilance.

Part 3: The Quasi Brave Who Returned Home

Three days flew by without incident. Or at least, nothing noticeable occurred, like a sudden bloodbath at the orphanage or all the children starting to hurl insults at Willem.

Almaria was scurrying energetically to and fro around the house as usual.

“I’m home!”

“Welcome back — you’re all covered in mud! Here, wipe it off.”

“Almaria! I need to pee!”

“Okay okay, hold on a second I’m coming.”

“I’m hungry! I need a snack.”

“You just ate lunch, didn’t you? Alright, wait one moment.”

Right, left, up, down, she ran every which way.

Willem watched her from the garden as he did some work.

“Well… it’s good that she’s full of energy,” he muttered, then swung his hammer down upon an iron nail with a clank.

“What are you doing?” Nephren appeared beside him.

“Exactly what it looks like. I’m repairing this broken fence.”

“Lies. You were looking at Almaria and smiling.”

“Seeing her just cheered me up, that’s all.”

“Hmm.” With an expression that made it hard to tell whether she believed him or not, Nephren took a seat behind Willem. Then, she leaned against him so that they were back to back and opened a book she probably borrowed from somewhere in the orphanage.

“I can’t work like this.”

“Don’t move.”

Willem set down his hammer. "... you've gotten pretty good with the language."

"I studied it once with Lan, so I know a lot of the basic grammar and vocabulary. After that I just need to listen and speak a lot."

"Yeah, well usually that part's not so simple." Remembering the struggle he went through trying to learn the common language of Regul Aire, Willem smiled bitterly. Also, he found it hard to believe that Nephren was actually practicing that 'speak a lot' part. "You can use the common language when you're talking with me, you know?"

"No." Nephren shot down Willem's suggestion. "The key to learning new words is to only use new words. If you run away to words you already know, you'll forget them all."

"Serious, huh?" Willem sighed. "If I could give you this language Talisman, that would make things easier. But for some reason it won't come off."

"Even if you could, I don't need it. Convenience is

the enemy of growth."

"Geez, how serious are you?" In front of Willem's eyes, a half fixed fence. To his right, a hammer. To his left, iron nails. Behind him, Nephren's warmth. He gazed idly at the sky and answered, "There's no need to work so hard to learn it, is there? Once you leave this world you'll never use the language again."

"But I'll use it until I leave, right?" Nephren said as she flipped through her book. "You said we would wait. Until our enemy gets impatient and starts interfering with the world. So that leaves plenty of time to use the language."

Willem did indeed tell Nephren that. Although, at the time he hadn't been imagining such a long time frame. He figured it would only take half a day or so.

"Besides, there are a lot of interesting things," Nephren continued.

"Interesting?"

Nephren's grammar was a little off, but Willem

could tell what she meant. He started to turn around to face her, but, since they were sitting back to back, that caused Nephren to start to fall over. Willem quickly turned back to his original position, where he couldn't see her expression.

"If this is your dream, then things that you don't know of shouldn't appear."

"Hm, I guess."

Willem heard the flipping of pages from behind him.

"West Gar… Garm… Garmond Flowing Sands Confederation? Out of the twenty original participating clans, do you know how many members of the royalty were still alive in year 1030 of the empire calendar?"

"Uh… wha?"

Nephren's unexpected question threw Willem into a state of confusion for a moment. Of course, he knew of the West Garmond Flowing Sands Confederation. It referred to the large desert which

covered almost the entire western half of the Garmond region and the government of the peoples who lived there. They had deep knowledge of peculiar types of spells, especially existence alteration types. But come to think of it, that was just about all Willem knew about them. He didn't recall ever learning about their history or political structure.

"If I read this correctly, that fact is written within this book."

"... seriously?"

As Willem explained to Nephren earlier, dream worlds created by such Talents as their enemy surely possessed reflected the target's memories. As a consequence, things unknown to the victim never appeared inside the fake world.

"Of course, I don't even know what this West Garmond place is. Which means, there are things written here which neither you nor I know."

"For real... ouch!" Willem instinctively muttered in

the Regul Aire common language, only to receive a nasty pinch in the behind.

“No common language.”

“Okay okay, got it. Anyways, so… what could this mean?”

“Our enemy is interfering?”

Could it be? No, if that were the case Willem wouldn’t understand their enemy’s motives at all. What kind of damaging effect could reading a random unknown fact in a book possibly have on their morale? And if Nephren never started reading that book in the first place, they never would have seen it. Such a minor interference would be meaningless.

“… let’s not worry about it for now.” Willem came to the conclusion that further thought would not yield anything of use.

“Can we afford to do that?”

“It’s better to not go too deep into mystery solving when we have so little information. The more

hypotheses and assumptions we make, the harder it'll be to see the answer later on. Let's not read too much into things until we get a clearer hint."

"I see." Nephren returned to her book without further comment.

"... I can't work while you're sitting there." As before, Willem's complaint was completely ignored.

Within the territory of the empire were many spots well known for their beautiful scenery. For example, Snowflake Avenue in district one of the imperial capital. Or the Negatis Commemorative Church. Or Fistilas Lake. The Obsidian Tower and Grave of the Twins would have also been included in that list, but they were razed in the fires of war by the other races. Poets praised the empire as the 'treasure box of the land', and the peoples' hearts overflowed with nationalistic pride. That said, however, every tiny bit of the empire wasn't as refined and filled with beauty as those monuments. No matter how developed the large cities were, the countryside remained the same old countryside.

The city of Gomag belonged to the countryside. It managed to be a little off from all the major trade routes running through the empire, didn't boast any famous buildings, and didn't have any particularly famous products. Accordingly, not many tourists or aspiring business owners stopped by. Gomag, situated a fair distance away from the borders, also had no need to fear the fires of war. Its residents saw the same faces, talked about the same things, and went through the same events day after day.

Caught out by a sudden downpour, Willem and Nephren hurried into a nearby cafe to take shelter.

"Wow, look at that."

Outside, the rain continued to batter down with ever increasing intensity. It limited their visibility, but even so they could make out the figures of people running about hurriedly. A wind had also begun to blow, rendering an umbrella effectively useless.

“Guess we gotta kill time until it stops… hey, can we order?” After a brief glance at the menu, Willem called a waiter. “I’ll have a coffee and… fried potatoes. She’ll have…” He looked over to Nephren and asked in the Regul Aire common language, “You okay with orange juice?”

“I’ll have a coffee too, and also this scone with three varieties of jam.” Nephren completely ignored him and ordered for herself. “No spoiling me.”

“Right.” Willem shrugged. Well, at least she didn’t pinch his butt this time.

“… I know it’s obvious, but everyone here is markless.”

“It’s the same in the fairy warehouse too, isn’t it?”

“I rarely get the chance to see a place with lots of adult or male markless though.”

The markless races tend to have a weaker physique than the others. As a result, not many of them become soldiers in the Winged Guard. To Nephren, who pretty much only ever saw the residents of the

68th Island and the soldiers, this place must seem like some kind of exotic zoo.

“So, did you find any interesting books?”

“I won’t know until I read them. I just grabbed them randomly, so I’m not expecting much.”

A paper bag filled with a few books sat on Nephren’s lap. They had been checking out a nearby bookstore a little before the rain started.

In their current time setting, large printing machines were already being widely used, making books much easier to obtain compared to earlier times when each one needed to be copied by hand. The street they were on also happened to be situated behind the one and only college in Gomag, so there were plenty of bookstores, from fully fledged shops to little stands by the roadside. Needless to say, a wide variety of books lay waiting on the many shelves.

Willem felt like he could see Nephren’s eyes sparkling. Even though she was still relatively

unfamiliar with the Emnetwyte language, she seemed to be pretty excited at the chance to read all the new books. They had decided to go shopping with the goal of shedding light on the abnormalities in the world around them. By examining and comparing books which contained information that neither of them knew, they might be able to gain some kind of hint as to their enemy's motives. But even if that plan failed, just seeing Nephren so happy by itself made their shopping trip worth it already. Willem hid a smile as he thought to himself.

When they entered the cafe, about half of the seats had been filled. Those customers all stayed put because of the rain, so as a result it was getting pretty busy. Naturally, almost all of them were college students. Willem felt that he, who didn't look like much of an intellectual, and Nephren, who was too young to even pursue academics, stood out from the crowd a bit.

— *What would Kutori say about this situation?* She would probably look down and ask something like

‘does it look like we’re a couple on a date?’ while blushing. Then Willem would respond ‘probably looks like you’re my younger sister’, and Kutori would say ‘don’t treat me like a kid!’. As the situation played out in his head, his chest tightened.

“Willem?” Nephren asked worriedly.

“It’s nothing.” He must have let his bitter emotions show on his face.

“Did you find out what’s off?”

“Hm? … oh, that.” The world around them was no more than a dream based on someone’s memory with some changes possibly made by the creator. That much they already knew. The problem was after that. “It’s hard. We don’t even know whose memories this world is based off of yet.”

Since they were in his hometown, at first Willem thought it was his memory. But if that were the case, the world wouldn’t contain information he didn’t know. He looked outside the window at the

winter streets of Gomag. The green shades of moss growing on the stone pavement. Tiny cracks in the brick walls. Graffiti scattered about here and there.

“Whoever it is, they know more about Gomag than I do, read more books, and must be as familiar with the orphanage as I am. I don’t have a clue who could fit all those conditions.”

“Hmm.”

“Besides, we were the only ones down there on the land. No one else could’ve been the target of the attack. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Hmm.”

Nephren didn’t sound too invested in the conversation. “Hmm? Is that all you have to say?”

“I’m not that interested,” she replied coolly.

Not that interested? If they didn’t solve this problem, they would never be able to go back to reality.

“It’s kinda comfortable here. I wouldn’t mind

staying longer," Nephren added on.

"This is a fake world, filled with fake people. Nothing here is real. Every moment spent here is empty and meaningless."

"You're telling me that?"

Willem fell silent. Leprechauns are fake life. Fake Emnetwyte made for the sole purpose of deceiving the Kaliyons. Nothing about them is real. Yet, they unmistakably exist. Second Technician Willem Kumesh couldn't bring himself to ignore that last point, and so he decided to care for them, defying the empty nature of his job.

"Almaria is here. I am here," Nephren said.

The people in the dream were probably fake. Fictional beings created for the sole purpose of deceiving the trapped victims. In other words, exactly the same as the fairies in the warehouse.

"The real world, or this one. You can choose which one you like more."

"... geez, you're making this a whole lot more

difficult for me," Willem grumbled quietly.

The rain showed no signs of letting up.

As their coffees arrived, Nephren took out one of her shiny new books and immersed herself into reading right away. Willem, who unfortunately didn't have anything to kill time with, idly stared out the window and listened to the sound of the rain.

He used to hate being bored. Or more like, he couldn't stand wasting time. After all, he had a goal. And not just any goal, but one so far it was unattainable with a decent amount of hard work. So he went beyond decent. If he had even a tiny bit of free time, he spent it all on improving himself.

In the end, his beyond decent hard work got him to a peculiar gray area which he didn't know whether to call success or failure. Certainly, having acquired countless skills and studied countless techniques, Willem had grown fairly strong. His diverse arsenal led to consistent results on the battlefield. A few of

his comrades said that he could do pretty much anything that any other human could do, and Willem himself felt like he was getting fairly close to that being true.

But still. Willem's goal was to become a Regal Brave. And that meant not only being able to do anything that others could do, but also things that no one should've been capable of. No matter how close Willem got to the pinnacle of humanity, he could never set one foot in the territory above that. Training and studying had no meaning. Or at least, they would never bring him to his goal, no matter how diligently he worked. Yet even after knowing and accepting that fact, Willem couldn't stop. He didn't really know why himself. Maybe he just didn't want to let all his past effort go to waste.

There were times when he thought that maybe it was all pointless. Maybe if he had given up on his impossible dream right away and spent his free time like a normal teenage boy, he would've gotten to experience more things and lived a more

fulfilling life. Maybe he would've even gotten better at dealing with girls. Maybe he would've been able to actually bring happiness to those who loved him.

"Willem!?"

A man's sudden voice cut off Willem's train of thought. Turning around, he spotted a silver haired young man looking his way with a cheerful smile. The man's entire body was drenched from the downpour outside.

"Willem! It's you! It's been so long! When did you get back to Gomag?"

Nephren stopped reading for a second and gave Willem a look that asked 'acquaintance?'. Willem nodded.

"Just a few days ago."

"Oh, never seen her before. A new kid at the orphanage?"

"Yeah, something like that."

The young man took a seat without bothering to ask

for permission and smiled at Nephren. “Nice to meet you. My name is Theodore Brickroad. I’ve been friends with Willem since way back. Everyone I’m close with calls me Ted, so you can call me that too.”

Nephren’s eyes never budged one inch from her book. Completely ignored. Willem thought he saw beads of nervous sweat appear on Ted’s forehead.

“You look like you’re doing well, Ted.” Willem broke the awkward silence.

“Ah, indeed I have! I’ve leveled up quite a lot too!”

“Level…” Willem thought for a bit. “… ah, you became an adventurer?”

The adventurers made a living by putting themselves in danger. They fought against the Monstrous, explored the mysterious Mazes, and risked their lives bringing down the Dragons. Of course, all those missions, being extremely dangerous, offered attractive rewards to those brave, or perhaps foolish, enough to accept them.

“You didn’t know!?” Ted exclaimed.

“No. It’s been awhile since I’ve been in Gomag, and I have no interest in you.”

“At least pretend to know! Honesty is a virtue, but sometimes the truth hurts too much, you know!?”

Hahaha. This guy. “Well? What level are you now?” Willem asked.

An adventurers ‘level’ indicated his skill in battle and extent of his training. The higher, the better. A regular civilian would rank around 2 or 3. A capable soldier, around 10. One who lived and died for battle would reach around 30. That was considered to be a sort of upper limit for what humanity could reach. To reach beyond that number, one would need to step outside of the framework of a human.

“I’m level 8,” Ted responded.

Fairly average for your everyday adventurer. Taking his young age into account, it might even be a little on the high side. Ted’s level was something he could be proud of.

“Oh by the way, I’ve heard that your level is really

high, even beyond the level 30 wall."

"Ah... well, yeah..." Willem wasn't an adventurer himself, but he often fought alongside them, so he had his level estimated a few times. The last time he got it checked, his level was 69. Needless to say, everyone nearby was astounded at that ridiculous number.

"Wow, that's amazing. Are there special training methods that the Church of Holy Light teaches only to Braves or something?"

"No, not really." Willem took a sip of his coffee. "Besides, it's just a number. Do you want it that bad?"

Certainly, level served as an indicator of one's strength. But conversely, it was no more than a single indicator. There were plenty of low levels that proved themselves useful on the battlefield, and, unfortunately, there were even more of the opposite. Willem never thought of it as something to worry too much about.

“Of course I want it. For us adventurers, our level determines our salary too. If your level isn’t high enough, you can’t get information on the high reward missions.”

Ah, I see. So that’s how the Guild prevented needless deaths. The idea of an adventurer not allowed to get close to danger did seem amusing though.

“If you really just want to raise your level, it’s not that hard. Just keep brute forcing your way through difficulties and it’ll go up all on its own.”

“They’re called ‘difficulties’ for a reason…”

“… anyways, it’s not exactly a secret trick, but I have an idea of how to level up fast.”

“Really?!” Ted leaned forward in excitement.

“Let’s see… somewhere close to here… ah, that’s right. In the city of Alvalie there’s this guy called the Holy Blade of the West gathering disciples. Go there, and learn the ‘final secret techniques’.”

“Final secret techniques?”

“Once you start training, you either master the techniques and go home, or you die. It’s one of those kinda deals.”

“… die?” A hint of skepticism began to show in Ted’s voice.

“It was a sort of compound of multiple different skill types that let you crush an opponent’s innards even from above their armor. Guys with some sense could usually grasp the technique when driven to the brink of death, and guys without sense, well, they never got to learn it.”

“… um?” Uneasiness now clearly showed in Ted’s voice.

“Now as for the training itself, it was a real deal Dragon takedown.”

“I’d definitely die. There’s no way I would survive for five seconds.”

“Well technically it’s a subspecies of Dragon, but still a Dragon. So basically ridiculously strong, scales tough as steel, resistant to regular weapons…

the only way to survive is to reach enlightenment and acquire the secret technique during battle, then use it right away to kill the Dragon. Or that's how it's supposed to be anyways. That enlightenment never came to me."

"... huh?" Ted's eyes opened wide. "Ah, did you use some kind of sneaky trick?"

"I suppose you could call it that. Since I couldn't use the secret technique, I just killed it with brute force."

"..... huh?"

"They said the Dragon was resistant to regular weapons, but apparently that meant weapons just had a very tiny effect, not no effect at all. I tried all sorts of skills, and after about a week the tiny wounds accumulated and the Dragon just fell down."

"... ah..."

"As I said, as long as you keep brute forcing your way through difficulties, your level will go up. I

think just from that my level increased by 10. That Holy Blade guy was speechless, to say the least."

"..... I would be too." For some reason, Ted's voice sounded exhausted.

When Willem's master and Leila heard about that little ordeal, they exploded in laughter, saying something like 'people with no sense sure have it rough'. Rude bastards.

"If you keep doing things like that, your level and the number of dojos you're banned from will steadily increase. Using forbidden spells is also a good method. They're easy to use, but the backlash can be pretty nasty. If you can endure that, though, you can get about two or three levels." Willem smiled broadly at Ted. "If you want, I write you some referral letters."

"No, sorry but I think I will pass. I want to live a steady life."

Then why the hell did you become an adventurer? "So what do you plan on doing once your level's

higher?"

"Well, you know..." For some reason, Ted's cheeks flushed red, and he scratched them nervously as he spoke. "Then I'll be able to propose to Almaria."

"Oookay I'll introduce you to a training program that'll get you 50 levels instantly so prepare your last will and testament."

"Sorry I won't do that please forgive me." Ted backed his chair away from Willem, only to have a waiter tell him to stop.

— Willem suddenly felt like some sharp object grazed against the back of his neck.

"... Willem?" Ted asked.

"Ah, sorry. I need to go." Rubbing his nape with his palm, Willem stood up.

Nephren looked up from her book. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, it looks like I have one more old friend to meet... Ted, sorry but can you take this one home to

the orphanage?" he said, then left the cafe.

"Huh? Uh... Willem?"

Willem ignored Ted's confused voice and kept on walking. The rain still hadn't let up, but now was not the time to be worrying about that.

An old memory suddenly ran through Willem's mind.

The setting was a little more than 527 years ago, a few days before he and six others gathered to defeat Visitor Elq Harksten.

"I don't really like big swords," Leila said. According to her, she preferred a length about as long as her arm and a weight light enough to swing around easily with one hand. In other words, an anti-humanoid longsword with which she could use the wide range of skills she learned from her parents, teacher, and master (apparently those last two were different people).

Kaliyons, on the other hand, were huge swords made to kill those who far surpassed the humans.

Kind of like a stepping stool to help the weakling Emnetwyte stand as tall as possible. So Leila didn't like them very much.

Willem understood what she was trying to say. He understood, but at the same time, he wasn't so sure if the current Regal Brave and chosen user of the legendary Seniolis should be saying such a thing. Countless people in the world longed to be chosen by a strong Kaliyon but remained unchosen and longed to hold great power but remained unable to attain it. For one who had both to speak lightly of them would not sit very well with all those people. If Leila said such things publicly, some angry guy just might stab her one day. Actually, Willem wanted to stab her right that instant.

"... so I challenged her to a practice duel and got destroyed," Willem groaned to Navrutri, who didn't look very impressed.

Shining Staff into Bear Palm. Fox Tail into Needle Elbow. Demolishing Nightingale Dash into Frolicking Iron Bell Smash. All the skills Willem

worked so hard to learn from Hilgram were no match for the special perception ability granted only to the chosen Regal Brave. Using that Abyssal Eye, as it was apparently called, she saw right through all of Willem's moves and swiftly countered them. He even tried using the 'Blazing Sun Walk' and 'Footsteps of the North Star' which he learned from Navrutri, but it was no use. The wall of the Regal Brave's talent and skill towered high above Willem's head.

"Willem, I think you're misunderstanding something," Navrutri said with an exaggerated sigh. "Us men cannot win against women. No matter how many times you challenge them, you'll never come close. All we can do is beg for their love."

"I was stupid to think I'd get any serious advice out of you." Willem groaned again.

"No no, I'm being very serious. I think this issue may be due to a difference in swordsmanship." Navrutri sliced the air with his finger, as if

brandishing an imaginary sword. “Your style of fighting is suited for battle. The aim is to chip away at your enemy’s strength, dish out large amounts of damage, and destroy. You could say it’s a style that classifies everything in front of you into two categories: things that you can kill, and things that you can’t. It rejects any more information than that.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, it’s standard for a warrior. No one’s going to find fault in that style.” Navrutri shrugged. “But you don’t actually want to defeat Leila, so that style isn’t really suited for such an opponent.”

“… well if I could defeat her then I’d like to try, but…”

“Indeed that is every man’s dream, but alas a futile one. I’ll cheer you on though. From a safe place off in the shadows.”

“So if my swordsmanship is suited for battle, then what about Leila?”

“Hmm, her style closely resembles Nils’. Maybe she learned well from him because she’s obedient at heart, or maybe her personality’s just made from the same stuff as his.”

Nils D Foreigner. Leila’s master, and Willem’s ‘good-for-nothing master’.

“Not wanting to get hurt, and not wanting to hurt others, yet taking up the sword because there’s no other choice… typical case of a coward’s swordsmanship.”

Willem arrived in a narrow alleyway and stopped walking. A silver blade suddenly appeared pressed right up against the back of his neck. A thin stream of blood seeped out, only to be washed away by the rain.

“Hey,” he called out calmly. “A rather old fashioned way to invite someone to talk, don’t you think? It’s not like we’re strangers, if you want to talk you can just tell me with words, you know?”

“…it’s not a subject I want to discuss in front of

people." A man wearing a black water repellant robe appeared behind Willem and answered casually. "Before we rekindle old friendships, there are a few things I want to ask you. I would be grateful if you could answer honestly, Willem."

"Well, go ahead. You know I'm bad at hiding things, don't you?"

"First question," the man continued, ignoring Willem's playful comments. "Why are you here?"

"... well, Gomag is my hometown, you know? If you ask me, it's way more unnatural that you're here."

"I guess you didn't understand my question." The blade grazing Willem's neck bit slightly deeper. "That day of the final battle, you and Ebon Candle simultaneously defeated each other in your fight. Why are you suddenly here now?"

"... what?"

For a second, Willem failed to comprehend the question. Then, the moment he grasped the meaning in those words, he realized that he had

forgotten to think about one very important point up until now. He had gotten so caught up on the fact that the world was simply a dream that he forgot to confirm exactly when the dream was set.

From what the man just said, Willem could infer a few things. First, the world was set at a time after they went to defeat the Visitors, but before the 17 Beasts appeared. Second, Willem never returned home from that battle — most likely, his body was now a chunk of stone rolling around on the battlefield. And lastly, the world was not just based off of Willem's memory, as he and Nephren had suspected. Besides the unknown facts in the books, he now knew that the world was progressing through a time in which he never experienced for himself back then.

What the heck is going on? Willem most likely spent only a few seconds lost in thought. The man behind him, apparently taking that silence as some kind of answer, withdrew the blade from Willem's neck.

"... are you sure it's okay to let me go? I still haven't

given you an answer."

"I wasn't intending to threaten you in the first place. Against the strongest Quasi Brave, this blade is no more useful than a toy sword."

"Strongest?" Willem chuckled. "It feels wrong to be called that by you, Navrutri."

Slowly, Willem turned around. The man took off the hood of his water resistant robe, revealing a head of bright red hair and the unshaven face of a man in his thirties.

Navrutri Teigozak. A Quasi Brave recognized by the Church of Holy Light. Hailing from one of the clans of West Garmond, his weapon of choice was his clan's hereditary dual curved blades. When it came time to stand against stronger enemies, however, he unsheathed his beloved Kaliyon Lapidem Sybilus.

"No need to put so much praise on me," Willem said. "You've been a Quasi Brave for longer, and you're more skilled. You also wield a higher class Kaliyon than I do."

Navrutri let out a small laugh. “The fact that you’re being serious and not modest when you say that is what makes you scary.”

Willem laughed back. “The fact that you’re being serious and not just teasing when you say that is what makes you annoying.”

A brief silence. The sound of the rain violently hitting the stone paving alone filled the air.

“… yes, that black skull and I defeated each other. I don’t remember what happened after that. When I came to, I was in Gomag. That was in the morning, three days ago.” Willem answered Navrutri’s question from earlier. To honestly tell the full story, he would need to explain that this entire world was fake, and that seemed like a rather difficult task, so he decided to keep those bits hidden. “In fact, I’d like to know what happened myself.”

Willem lightly scratched his rain soaked hair. “How did that battle turn out in the end? Judging by the fact that humanity isn’t extinct yet, I’m guessing that we defeated the Visitors. And now I know that

you made it back safely, but what about the others?"

Navrutri didn't answer.

"And also, what's with suddenly putting a knife to your comrade's neck? Explain the situation to me."

"True World," Navrutri muttered. A rather embarrassing name for an organization in Willem's opinion. "You remember, don't you? What they once did to try to overthrow the capital. The remnants of that group are still trying to carry out their plan."

Ah. Well, when Willem thought about it, it wasn't too surprising. This dream world was created based on the past, at a time after their battle with the Visitors, so of course the appearance of the 17 Beasts came next. A few days after that, the town would be devoured, the country would fall into ruin, and the entire race of humans would disappear off the face of the earth. Which meant, the True World guys who created the Beasts were scheming somewhere in the world even as they spoke, poised to bring an end to it all.

Willem felt a little like a prophet. But it did feel kind of strange to know the future for certain. It was like a mix of being omnipotent yet powerless at the same time. If Willem had to say, between pleasant and unpleasant, the feeling leaned heavily towards unpleasant.

Hiding the troubled thoughts running through his head behind a straight face, Willem asked, "And how is True World related to you being here?"

"True World has either a Brave or a former Brave among them."

"– What?" That was news to Willem, and unexpected news at that. "I would say that's a lie, but I know you're not the type to act on unreliable information. Which means you have a good source. And since you're not hiding the news, you must have judged that slowing the traitor's actions by making him be more careful is more important than actually discovering his identity or preventing the Quasi Braves from becoming suspicious of each other."

"You pick up fast, as always," Navrutri said. "Now if

only you could read women that well, you'd be more popular."

Shut up. Willem didn't particularly want to be popular with the ladies, but being told that by Navrutri, who was always boasting about his numerous lovers, made him extremely frustrated.

"Judging by your reaction, I think I can assume you have no ties with True World." Navrutri spread out his hands, and the silver knife he held in his right hand just moments ago disappeared as if in a magic trick. "But, I'm guessing you weren't entirely honest. I think we both know you didn't just wake up three days ago."

... he picks up fast, as always. And he can read women that well too. Damn it.

"Alright, Willem. You are free from suspicion, for the time being. Do me a favor by not standing out too much until this situation settles down," Navrutri said, then turned around.

"You sure you don't need any help?"

“My job right now is to doubt my comrades. I can’t entrust my back to someone who I can’t say is innocent with 100% certainty,” Navrutri responded with his defenseless back faced towards Willem. He couldn’t tell whether that was on purpose or not.

“… I suppose I can give you one more answer. The only ones who survived the battle with the Visitors and the Poteau were me and Leila only. Well, and I guess you too.”

“… I see.” Willem had already heard the outcome from the Great Sage, Suwon. So of course the news wasn’t surprising, but still it dampened his mood.

“The only bodies we were able to recover were Suwon’s and Emissa’s. Suwon cast some kind of complicated spell on himself, so his body is currently safely stored away in the church’s underground sanctuary.”

What are you doing, Great Sage? This isn’t the time to be taking a leisurely nap. Apparently, Suwon’s self resuscitation spell hadn’t kicked in quite yet.

“I think that’s about all I can tell you for now. When all this is over, I’ll tell you the rest over some drinks,” Navrutri said, then started walking off.

“Hey, Navrutri.” Driven by impulse, Willem called out to the back of his old comrade. “Ah… how have you been?”

Navrutri stopped for a brief moment and answered, “Just fine.” Then, he disappeared off into the heavy rain.

Willem gazed up at the sky.

Even in this dream world, the drops falling on his skin felt as cold as ever.

A loud sneeze echoed throughout the narrow alley.

Part 4: The Scarlet Haired Girl

A large painting hung from one of the walls of a small church. It depicted a vast, barren wasteland and about ten faceless men and women standing on it, all huddled around each other.

“Out from the faraway ocean of stars, the gods descended on the wasteland.”

A young girl stood in front of that painting, gazing up at it. Her bright scarlet hair resembled a lively flame, and her body frame was typical of a girl in her mid-teens. But her innocent, enraptured facial expression as she stared at the painting on the wall almost looked like an infant’s.

“Upon seeing the empty, bleak plains, the gods were filled with sadness. They split off small portions of their souls and gave them to the wild beasts which crawled on the land. Carrying the soul fragments within them, the beasts gained intelligence and started to walk across the land on two legs. That is

how the race known as humans came to be." The old man who ran the church finished his explanation and stood next to the young girl. "You seem to be studying the painting quite intently, young lady. Are you interested in the legend of the Visitors?"

"Mm." The girl nodded slightly. "I've never seen my father or the others."

The instructor seemed pleasantly surprised. The story of how the Visitors created the humans which the Church of Holy Light taught was not widely believed amongst the commoners, so a person so passionate in their belief that they referred to the Visitors as their parents was quite rare. Or at least, that's what the old man thought when he heard the girl's remark.

"There is no need for lonely thoughts. The souls of us humans were given to us by the gods. As long as we are here, so are the souls of our distant ancestors, the Visitors."

"I don't think that's possible," the scarlet haired girl said with a sad smile. "The soul fragments from the

Visitors were limited. But the humans grew in population too fast. The fragments within each individual began to weaken and lose meaning. Am I wrong?"

The instructor frowned. The girl's comments contained some beliefs which contradicted the Church's teachings. He thought about pointing them out to her, but something else caught his attention.

"Why do you speak in past tense?"

"Even though those events are the present for you, for me they're the distant past." She didn't seem to be joking or playing dumb. The girl had the transparent and empty expression of one who had given up on everything, an expression completely unfitting for a young girl.

"What are you ta–"

"Ah." The girl suddenly cut off the man as he started to question her. "Sorry, I have to go now. Carma is calling." She turned around sharply, causing the

hem of her travel clothes to flutter slightly.
“Goodbye. I really liked that painting.”

“W-Wait one se… eh…”

The instructor thought he had heard a tiny footstep, but in the next instant the girl’s figure disappeared completely from his view. He drew back the hand which he had stretched out to grab the girl’s shoulder with, and stared at his palm.

“… hm…?”

His memory rapidly grew cloudy. Someone had been here just now. He exchanged words with that someone. He was so sure of that, yet he couldn’t recall what that someone looked like, what that someone’s voice sounded like, or what they had talked about. It felt almost as if he had been tricked by a fairy in the foggy darkness of night.

“What just…” he muttered, but no one was there to answer.

The old man shifted his gaze to the painting hung on the wall. Of course, the Visitors trapped within

the canvas couldn’t speak to him. Yet, for one brief moment, he thought he saw lonely smiles on their originally undrawn faces.

Chapter 3: Things Which Cannot Be Reclaimed



Part 1: The Seven

They probably took great care in creating their plan. They probably invested long hours and large sums of resources into their meticulous preparations. A horde of Monstrous strengthened by alteration curses. Puppet warriors forged with lavish amounts of heavy metals forbidden under the law. Cockatrices forcibly controlled by response spells. Each of those held power equal to, or no, surpassing that of a small army. The terrifying assembly could have crushed a small country with ease. When the plan was put into action, the masterminds behind it were probably already convinced of their victory.

How many years ago was that? At the time, Willem was fourteen. So that means four years in Willem's time, 529 years in reality, and a mere two years in the dream world. That's right. Here, those events occurred just two years ago.

Willem swung his sword. And swung again. And

again.

After about the twentieth, it grew too bothersome to count the number of enemies he had slain. He set his mind free from all distractions and concentrated on simply cutting down the enemies in front of his eyes.

However, the curse strengthened Monstrous proved to be troublesome. An alteration curve completely overwrote the victim's natural state of being. They sometimes appeared in children's stories, like when a person got turned into a stone statue or when a little bird got turned into a cute girl. Such magic could be used to bestow strength originally unattainable or infuse weapons into the target's very body.

Now, having said all that, the enhanced Monstrous weren't actually that tough to beat. The problem lied in Willem's Kaliyon. Both his sword and his enemies had advanced, elaborate spells working within them, and the Kaliyon's condition gradually worsened as it hewed its curse ridden foes. At first

Willem thought about ignoring it and simply pushing on until the end, but the number of enemies surrounding him proved to be far greater than what he imagined. If he didn't bother to fix the sword right away, the battle would only end up taking more time, since he would be fighting at decreased efficiency.

I guess there's no avoiding it.

Willem created some distance between him and the pack of enemies with Blazing Sun Dash and passed Venom through the Kaliyon in his right hand.

"Start maintenance!"

Upon the start of maintenance, the binding force in the spell lines which held the metal fragments, or Talismans, together would normally dissolve, causing the sword to transform into no more than a gathering of 29 shards. Those shards would then disperse throughout the surrounding air and prepare to receive fine tuning.

However, on the battlefield, there was no time for

such a leisurely maintenance. Instead of completely dissolving the spell lines, Willem only weakened them. The metal fragments scattered slightly, but not so much that the sword lost its overall shape. They left just enough space between them for a few of Willem's fingers.

He cut the approaching steel puppet soldiers in half with the Kaliyon in his left hand. At the same time, he slid his right thumb through the gaps in the metal fragments and pushed on the crystal hidden in the sword's interior. Through that contact, he could read the sword's condition.

... ah.

One part of the spinal circuit had become badly clogged with Venom, rendering Willem's magic unable to properly circulate throughout the blade. He could see why it had been working so poorly. He could perform a full maintenance afterwards, but right now he needed a quick fix to get through the fight. With his thumb, he switched some of the Talismans around, improvising a new route for the

Venom which bypassed the blockage. When finished, he returned the spell lines to normal.

There were numerous varieties of Kaliyons, but Willem particularly preferred the mass produced Percival model for this very reason. Its simple construction made maintenance much easier. No other sword could have its slayer level or resistances adjusted in the heat of battle. In addition, its relatively small size made it perfect for fourteen year old Willem. He could even dual wield as he was currently doing, but it put quite a bit of strain on him. Unfortunately, no matter how much he spoke of the Percival's excellence, the other Quasi Braves never got on board. They could hardly wrap their heads around the idea of performing maintenance by themselves.

Anyway, the Percival in his right hand had regained some vigor, but pretty soon the Dindrane in his left hand would start to wear out. He made a mental note to fight more carefully from now on and leapt back into the action, when a blinding flash of light

erupted before his eyes. A thunderous boom followed it, pounding Willem's eardrums more fiercely than any normal sound. The intense winds from the shockwave seemed to threaten to tear Willem's entire body apart.

"– Agh!"

Willem ignited a large amount of Venom and funneled his strength into his legs. With demolished vision and hearing, he managed to seek out the direction of the ground relying on his sense of equilibrium alone, then soared down for an emergency landing.

"Agh… ah…"

After a few seconds of moaning in pain, Willem's five senses gradually returned, and his lungs, which had been crushed by the impact, resumed their work. He took a deep breath, ignoring the slight pain in his throat, then yelled, "Emissaaa!? Are you trying to kill me!?!"

"Hm? Oh, didn't see you there."

A woman touched down on the ground a little ways away from him. Willem heard she was twenty years old. She wore a long skirt with frills completely inappropriate for a battlefield. With such an outfit, she should have gotten caked in mud after a few minutes of running around, but he couldn't spot even a trace of dirt on her. Emissa Hodwin. An adventurer with a level of 61, second highest out of all active adventurers.

"Are you crazy?!" Willem screamed.

"What, you turned out alright, and all the enemies are nicely cleaned up. What's the problem?"

He surveyed the battlefield, or rather, the place which used to be a battlefield just seconds ago. The ground on which he had been running around and fighting with his two Kaliyons was now no more than a giant bowl shaped depression. The horde of enemies was nowhere in sight.

A Venom explosion of absurdly large scale was responsible for the scene before Willem's eyes. The amount of Venom required for such an attack far

surpassed the limit of what a normal individual could ignite, but Emissa was no normal individual. In addition to her superior genes and remarkable talent, she had her own special control techniques which allowed her to realize such enormous destructive power. Willem stopped counting at around twenty, but he figured he probably slew fifty or sixty enemies in total after swinging his swords nonstop. The number of enemies Emissa just sent flying in one instant probably exceeded that.

"... wow, they're all gone."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Willem took a seat on the ground and looked around once more at the new landscape, which now had excellent visibility. Before the battle started, the steep yet beautiful slopes of mountains and a sparse forest of conifers had decorated the area. But now, the slopes had been leveled and the forest had transformed into rugged ground with nothing more than a few unearthed rocks poking out.

“I think you just destroyed a lot of natural habitats.”

“Just saying, it’s not all my fault. That mountain over there and that river were Hilgram’s doing.”

“… hm…”

Hilgram Moto. Adventurer, level 58. He didn’t use weapons, nor did he ignite Venom. By his own choosing, he stood on the front lines with only his bare fists. He was a bit of an eccentric, but an amazing martial artist.

Willem turned to look where Emissa pointed. A massive boulder had split apart as if it were made of sand, and numerous small streams flowed where a waterfall once stood.

“All that with his bare hands, huh. Looking at that, my self confidence as a Venom user kinda goes down,” Emissa said. Willem understood, but hearing her say that pissed him off slightly. “Now then, can you see how many enemies are left?”

“Uhh… I still see some in the forest that Kaiya’s in charge of, and… oh, there’s an entire group

remaining over there."

Emissa followed Willem's gaze. "Are those… ivy Dryads? If so, they're pretty big…"

"Hm, they've probably had their very nature altered by a curse, like the other monsters here."

"… creepy."

Alteration spells had enormous costs associated with them. Those mutants were probably the trump card of whoever planned the whole thing. For his ultimate weapons to be summed up with the single word 'creepy' by Emissa… Willem kind of felt sorry for the guy.

"Well? Who's gonna take care of those things? Not me, I'm not getting anywhere near them." The moment after Emissa finished talking, a gigantic circle of light appeared in the sky. "… ah, I guess Suwon will."

As they looked up at it, Willem and Emissa took earplugs out of their pockets. An invisible paintbrush continued to scatter light about,

drawing an intricate design in the sky.

“That’s pretty big,” Emissa remarked.

“His spells aren’t very effective against guys that are already cursed, so he’s probably trying to put as much force into it as possible in order to clean them up for certain.”

The seal being drawn in the sky acted as a sort of catalyst for a spell. The stronger the spell, the larger and more complicated the seal it required. Of course, on a battlefield, there was no time to draw each one from scratch. Almost all thaumaturgists inscribed seals on parchment or clay tablets beforehand, then utilized them during battle as needed.

However, Suwon Candel didn’t fit into the category of ‘almost all thaumaturgists’. He could inscribe the necessary seal for any spell that the situation called for right on the spot, no matter how complicated or specialized. Even Willem, who couldn’t carve the most basic of seals due to his terrible drawing sense, could tell that Suwon was a big fat cheater.

He truly sympathized with the other thaumaturgists of the world.

While Willem was busy thinking, the giant seal in the sky had been completed. He and Emissa simultaneously plugged their ears, turned around, and shut their eyes.

Five seconds later.

The two opened their eyes and turned back around to see the humble remnants of the great mountain that once towered above the area.

“This has got to be bad for the environment,” Emissa said.

Willem agreed, but again, hearing her say that pissed him off.

“Willem! Good work!” Kaiya Kaltran walked up to Willem and gave him a big hug.

“S-Stop! Ow! Dirty! Ow! Dirty!!”

Kaiya, level 39, was also an adventurer, and a proper one at that, unlike Emissa and Hilgram. She

protected her body with a suit of well tempered armor and slew her enemies with a sword forged by a master craftsman. If any normal human were hugged this hard by such an experienced warrior, his backbone would probably snap instantly. On top of that, Kaiya's post-battle armor was drenched in Monstrous blood.

"Sorry, sorry. You're just so cute I couldn't help myself."

"You just couldn't help but squeezing me so hard I needed to put up a full force Venom defense!?"

"Of course. I hug you so hard precisely because you put up a full force Venom defense. If I did that to any other kid, I'd have a bounty on my head the next day," Kaiya said with a smile. "Besides, you won't be this cute for much longer, right? Since you're in your growth spurt, next year or the year after you'll have grown into a splendid man. If I don't admire you now, it'll be too late."

Willem silently wished he would grow faster.

“Then it’s your sons’ turns. How many do you have now? Three?” Leila joined in on the conversation.

“Well about that, my husband doesn’t want to let our sons wield swords. I really wanted to start training them now, but…”

“Oh? Why not?”

“He says stuff like ‘I won’t let them pursue a violent career like an adventurer’, or ‘I won’t have both my wife and my children be stronger than me’. I can’t see what’s wrong with those, though.”

Willem silently cheered Kaiya’s husband on.

“Willem, you just silently cheered Kaiya’s husband on, didn’t you?” Navrutri read his mind as always.

“You don’t have to say that out loud… wha, what a mess,” Willem said, looking at his clothes. They had already received more than enough mud after his own battle and Emissa’s explosion, but now the blood from Kaiya’s armor joined the mix. Wearing this around would just be asking to get arrested by guards on the roads.

“I see you’re covered in mud. Did you not use the Blazing Sun Dash? I thought I taught you it earlier,” Navrutri asked.

“You did teach me, and I did use it. And I ended up like this,” Willem answered grumpily.

The Blazing Sun Dash was one part of the curved blade technique passed down in Navrutri’s native land. At its core, it was a feint technique based on controlling the tempo of one’s movements. If mastered, however, it apparently allowed the user to transform into a haze of heat, effortlessly flowing past any incoming attacks.

“If you get used to it a little more, you’ll be able to dodge clouds of dust too,” Navrutri said.

Willem doubted if he would ever get used to it ‘a little more’.

“I did it! Look, my clothes are all clean.”

Shut up Leila. Your talent is the enemy of all regular people.

“Well, come on, tell her how pretty they are. You

can't hold back those kinds of compliments."

"Yeah! Say it, say it! Be honest!"

Shut up you two.

Just then, Willem noticed a small boy sitting next to a Monstrous corpse a bit separated from the rest of the group. The edge of his oversized white mantle was getting soaked in mud and blood, but apparently he hadn't noticed.

"... what are you doing?" Willem walked up and asked.

Suwon Candel, the twelve year old genius thaumaturgist, answered without raising his head. "I was investigating the structure of the curse. I had a strange feeling about it during the battle."

"Curse?"

Willem ignited his Venom and turned on his spell vision. He saw complicated magic running throughout the Monstrous' entire body. Not being very familiar with the subject, he couldn't tell how the spell veins were connected or what kind of curse

they formed together.

“Is there something off about it?”

“The pattern is almost the same in all of them.” Suwon looked up at Willem. “Curses like these are usually custom made. If you don’t create a different curse catered to each individual, the effect weakens. That’s why these curses are so costly, and of course they can’t be mass produced. But these curses seem to have overcome that problem.”

“… so they figured out a way to put the same curse on as many creatures as they want!? I thought only Seniolis was capable of such ridiculous power!”

“No, it doesn’t look like it’s quite that powerful. Perhaps because they’re still in the process of research, the duplicated pattern is relatively simple and small scale. It can grow horns or muscle, or change the number or positions of internal organs, but nothing more…”

“So if they’re still in research, this’ll get pretty bad in the future, won’t it?”

“That’s right. If we don’t take care of the organization making these guys now, they’ll be a huge threat later.”

Willem scoured his memory for that forgotten name… it was something like…

“True World,” Suwon muttered.

“What a terrible name,” Willem said.

“Really? I think it’s kinda cool.”

Please never try to come up with a title for yourself.

At the time, Willem was fourteen years old. So those events took place four years ago in Willem’s time, 529 years ago in reality, and a mere two years ago in the dream world. That’s right. Only two years have passed since that day…

Part 2: Those Who Should Be Protected

Willem didn't know the exact date, but sometime soon the 17 Beasts were due to appear in this world. A few days after that, everything would be gone. Navrutri was currently working to stop that, but, well, it was probably no use. The world would be destroyed. That's what history said.

"What to do…"

While it was just a dream world, if they died it might have some negative effect on their real selves. They needed to find a way out before the Beasts came.

Guess I'll put a little more effort into it.

Someone had made this world and trapped Willem and Nephren in it with the intention of keeping them for eternity, or at least that was the probable situation. If that was true, their enemy would

surely come at them in an obvious attempt to break their will before the Beasts appeared and killed them. If they could detect that, they had a good chance at escaping.

Under the shade of a tree in the garden, Nephren was reading a book. She flipped through the pages one by one with her usual expressionless face. Off to the side, a group of boys hid in the shadows of another tree and observed Nephren.

“What is this,” Willem said as he watched from within the orphanage.

“I think it’s pretty clear what it is.” Almaria stood beside Willem and let out a rather unrefined laugh. “Nephren’s super popular, you know? She’s quiet, mysterious, and really good at sword fighting.”

Willem could understand now that Almaria pointed it out. Nephren really didn’t speak very much, it was always hard to tell what she was thinking, and her skills with a sword didn’t need any explanation.

“So small, yet so much stronger than level 8 me.

Kinda makes me lose self confidence…”

Willem thought he heard something. He decided to ignore it.

“Yep, so it’s only natural that our boys are interested in her. It would be nice if they could play together. She is a little hard to approach, though, so that’s why they’re waiting for the right opportunity like that,” Almaria said.

“… I see. They admire her like a pretty older sister.”

“Ahaha, yeah something like that.”

It felt strange to have Nephren be in the older sister position, but to the boys, who were even younger, just about everyone was older.

“So they’ve gotten to the age when they start thinking about that kind of thing, huh. How adorable.”

“Are you really in a position to be talking about it like that, father?” Almaria said teasingly. “Did you even find a girlfriend or fiancee?”

“Ah…” Kutori’s face flashed into his mind for an instant. “… I found a really nice girl, and, after a lot happened, I ended up proposing to her.”

“Eh.”

“Wha.”

Almaria and one insignificant other froze in shock.

“O-Oh, really? Is it someone I know? Could it be Leila? Emi? Suwon?? … it’s not Nephren, right?”

“Wait, there were some weird names in that list.”

Leila was, well, Leila, Emissa had a boyfriend, Suwon was a guy, and Nephren was a kid. None of them were viable options for a proposal.

“Oh, you said you met the imperial princess a while back, didn’t you? … could it be?”

“That’s too far of a jump…” Willem gave Almaria a little poke on the forehead. “It’s someone you don’t know. She’s straightforward and dedicated and kind and spoiled and uncompromising and simple and an idiot and simple and an idiot.” He didn’t

think he said too much. He could even add on another set of simple and an idiot.

"... hmm." Almaria peered into Willem's face. "I see. So you two are alike."

"Whoa wait a second, how'd you get to that conclusion?"

"Bring her over sometime, okay? I'll tease her to the best of my ability."

Willem sighed.

Bringing Kutori here to meet everyone... if only he could. Kutori and Almaria would probably get along well. They grew up in a similar environment and worried over similar troubles. Their main topic of conversation would probably be bad mouthing Willem, but...

"Ah, they're moving," Almaria said.

They returned their attention to the group of boys out in the garden. They walked up to Nephren, pushed a toy sword onto her, grabbed her by the hand, and pulled her up as they all clamored on

about something. And just like that, Nephren was forced into play sword fighting.

“Ooh, pretty assertive.”

“They don’t know how to treat girls at all. They take after you in that respect.”

“Hey, I don’t go that far.”

“Yeah you do, you just do it differently.”

Willem found it oddly difficult to argue with that. He had no choice but to shut up. The wind carried the dull sounds of clashing toy swords over to where he and Almaria stood.

“Ah, look look. Falco’s face is soo red,” Almaria exclaimed as she leaned slightly out of the window. “So cute…” she mumbled, her cheeks flushing red with excitement.

“But you’re the cutest…”

Willem heard some stupid mumbling off to the side. “Oh, didn’t know you were here, Ted.”

“I’ve always been here. Also please stop trying to

kick me by reflex."

"It's impressive you're able to defend in time, level 8. Next time I won't hold back. I'll kick you so hard your level will go up a bit if you survive."

"So in other words I'll die!?"

Ted continued skillfully dodging Willem's repeated kicks. It got kind of fun, so Willem tried gradually raising his speed.

"I see you two are getting along as usual." Almaria watched them strangely happily.

"So, why are you here anyways, Ted?" Willem asked.

"Just wanted to check in. I was worried, with the recent incidents and all, blgrgh!?"

Willem's heel found its way into Ted's side. Somehow, he managed to keep his cheerful smile as he writhed in pain.

"Incidents?"

"You know, the dream rumors. Haven't you heard?"

Willem had no idea what Ted was going on about.

“There have been increasing number of reports of people having strange dreams during the past few months. Moreover, the dreams are all the same, so people are saying it’s some sort of omen. It’s becoming a pretty big rumor. And according to the Alliance, it’s happening everywhere throughout the continent.”

“… dream, huh.”

To Willem, this entire world was already a dream. Talking about dreams within dreams seemed like it would get confusing. He kept those thoughts to himself, however.

“There’s more, too.” Ted sat up straight again while rubbing his side. “Recently, more and more people are falling into comas of unknown cause. People without any sort of illness that would cause such a thing just suddenly never wake up one day.”

“I see.”

“Rumors have been going around that the cause of those comas is the dream.”

"... eh." Almaria, who hadn't spoken up to that point, shivered slightly.

"Ah, sorry. It's nothing to get scared over. It's just a rumor," Ted answered with a smile, even as sweat streamed down his face from the pain. Willem admitted the guy had guts. "Well, there aren't exactly a lot of people in comas, and it might just be a coincidence. But still, you can't help but get interested when you hear those kinds of rumors. So today I came with the excuse of making sure everyone's doing fine, but I'm really just here to see Alma — ah!"

Dodged again. He had good reactions. Just as Willem was about to send out a follow up attack, the doorbell rang.

"Hm, a guest?"

"Ah, it might be the guy from the new rental library nearby. All they have is difficult books, so I tell him not to come, but whenever they get new books he comes to show me," Almaria said.

“I’ll get it.” Willem stopped Almaria, who was heading towards the foyer. He would be better suited to deal with an annoying visitor who doesn’t listen.

“Alright, but don’t do anything violent, okay?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“A rash father who knows no limits.”

Almaria knew him well. Well, now that his family understood, Willem would go show that unwelcome visitor what the border between life and death looks like. Cracking his shoulders, he walked over to the entrance. The bell rang once again.

“Coming, coming.” Willem grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door. “Sorry, but our kids don’t need difficult boo–”

“Hello, Willem.” Willem locked eyes with the visitor. The man smiled teasingly with his facial hair covered mouth. “Long time no see. How’ve you been doing?”

“… ah.” Willem pressed his fingertips against his

forehead, trying to suppress a sudden headache. "Long time no see, Navrutri. I'm doing just fine."

He tried to sound sarcastic, but Navrutri simply said, "Glad to hear that," then nodded cheerfully.

"Beautiful as always, Almaria."

"Welcome, Navrutri. Your flattery skills are impressive as always."

"No, no I'm being honest. A pretty bud blooms into a pretty flower. In another two years, you'll certainly be a wonderful lady that men won't be able to resist. I guarantee it."

"Sure, sure. I'll believe about half of what you said."

"Aw, can't you make that a little higher…"

"… hold on a second." Willem butted into their conversation. "Aly, you know Navrutri? I don't recall ever introducing you to this smiling beard man."

"Recently, he's been stopping by occasionally. He's your comrade, isn't he?"

"... Navrutri. What are you trying to do?" Willem asked suspiciously.

"Well, recently I've been in the area on business for the Church a lot. So, I stopped by to see if you or Nils were here. You two were absent a lot, but thankfully I caught you today," Navrutri responded coolly.

Only a very peculiar person would actually go out of his way to try to meet Nils, that good for nothing master. Willem didn't quite know how he felt about being grouped together with him.

"Of course, along the way, meeting this fine lady became one of my reasons as well."

"Okay, Navrutri, let's take this outside. I'll at least listen to what you want inscribed on your tombstone."

"Stop that, father... my apologies, Navrutri. He doesn't take jokes about me and the kids very well."

"Oh, but it wasn't a joke."

"And I won't let it slip by like a joke either."

“Just stop already,” Almaria said in an exasperated voice.

“Now then, Willem. There’s something I wanted to ask of you today.”

“Hm?” Willem thought he heard his face twitch with irritation. “I recall being told I can’t be trusted with your back just the other day.”

“Of course. It’s not about that.” Navrutri casually swept away Willem’s hostile comments. “Have you heard the rumors about the recent mysterious coma cases?”

Oh, that. It just came up in their conversation earlier. Willem shot a glance at Ted. Before Navrutri became a Quasi Brave, he achieved fame as an adventurer. Some adventurers passed on his tales almost as if he were a legendary figure. Apparently, Ted was one of them. Ever since Navrutri arrived, his eyes had maintained a high level of sparkle. Willem couldn’t help but notice that drastic difference in Ted’s attitude towards him and Navrutri, even though they were both Quasi Braves.

"... yeah, I've heard about it." Willem didn't mention that he just heard about it less than an hour ago.

"Good, that'll speed things up. True World is the group behind that."

... huh?

"That name sounds like it was made up by a bunch of teenagers that'll regret their choice in a few years," Ted offered his opinion, which sounded rather familiar.

"To put it simply, they're an evil religious group with military power. Willem and I, along with our happy comrades, took care of them once two years ago. However, they seem to have made a comeback."

"But their research was on repurposing living beings as weapons by curses, right? How is that related to putting people in comas?"

"The details aren't clear, but it's suspected that it's somehow a part of their research. Basically, we suspect they're developing some sort of curse which can induce its full effect even when the target is

chosen at random. Furthermore, they're developing techniques to spread this curse as wide and far as they want."

Willem felt chills run up his spine. Navrutri explained rather casually, but if True World actually finished such developments, they would be able to bring destruction to the world in a matter of days… or no, they will finish those developments, and they will bring destruction to the world in a matter of days. That was historical fact. They still didn't know how exactly the Beasts would be born, but it would be hard to imagine that those elite curse techniques weren't related in some way.

"The Empire Congress has recognized the danger of the situation, and the Alliance is in charge of the investigation for now. This incident is occurring almost everywhere throughout the continent, but the main focus right now is on empire territory. The investigation orders will likely reach Gomag's adventurer's guild soon," Navrutri explained.

Ted's ears perked up at hearing this.

“And how is all this related to me?” Willem asked.

“The Church wants to add one Quasi Brave to help out with the investigation in Gomag. At this rate, it looks like that job is going to be forced onto me, but…”

That’s strange, Willem thought. Adventurers and Braves working together by itself wasn’t too rare. Whether an extremely dangerous Monstrous or a Maze spreading miasma all around the area, whenever a high wall needed to be overcome, it only made sense for the two groups to join hands and work together. At their battle with the Visitors, three adventurers, Emissa, Kaiya, and Hilgram, lent their aid to the Regal Brave, Leila. But such cooperation usually only happened when there were enemies to hit or things to be destroyed. What would there be for a Brave to do on a mission with no fighting?

Well, whatever. That’s Navrutri’s problem. Willem figured Navrutri probably came to push this job onto him, but he wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Glad to see you found a job. Do your best.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Won’t you switch with me? You’ll be helping people in need.”

“The only one in need here is you.”

“Well, true, but…” Navrutri scratched the back of his head. “I am pretty busy right now. In fact, my current mission will literally impact the fate of the entire world.”

Willem didn’t doubt him. With the completion of the 17 Beasts so close, finding a way to stop True World would mean stopping the destruction of civilization. Well, no one would find a way, and civilization would fall into ruin. Willem knew that.

“… um, excuse me?” Almaria interrupted their exchange, which hardly qualified as a conversation. “All those people in comas have the same weird dream, right?”

“That’s the rumor. We don’t have proof that they’re connected yet, but we think that the dream might make the victim more susceptible to the curse or

something," Navrutri answered.

"Do you happen to know what kind of dream it is?" Almaria asked.

"Apparently, in the dream you're standing in a vast, gray plain of sand. And for some reason, you're overcome with a very nostalgic feeling."

Almaria looked to Ted, who nodded in confirmation of Navrutri's description. Then, with an uneasy face, she looked at Willem.

"What is it?" he asked.

With all eyes in the room on her, Almaria answered, "I've often had that dream since I was little," with a voice so faint it almost seemed to disappear into thin air.

"Hahaha, no need to worry, Aly," Navrutri said cheerfully, then gestured to Willem. "This experienced Brave right here will solve this problem in no time."

"Being told that by a Brave with a much longer career than me kinda pisses me off..."

This world is a dream. This Almaria is fake. Willem understood. He understood, but… but still… could he bring himself to condemn this girl, who looked like Almaria, spoke with Almaria's voice, and called him 'father' with Almaria's smile?

"Alright." No, he couldn't. "Damn it. I'll take your dumb job."

"I knew you would say that," Navrutri said with a broad grin. Willem really wanted to punch him right now. "I'm not pushing this on you just because I want to take it easy. If you work together with the adventurer's guild, the fact that you're still alive will get to the Alliance and spread to the entire continent, right?" Navrutri winked skillfully. He must have practiced often.

"People everywhere were saddened by the news of you not coming home. I won't make you go say hi to all of them, but at least get word of your safety out there. It'll give them some relief."

"Ah…" Of course, Willem had thought about that, but, within a dream, relief and worry were all just

fleeting illusions. With that mindset, he never got around to doing it. "... I'm not sure I want to hear this, but what is Leila up to?"

"Ah." Navrutri's expression darkened. He seemed to falter a bit before finding the right words. "The battle with the Visitors took a heavy toll on her. She's been in a treatment facility in the capital ever since."

"I see."

Willem didn't particularly care. It was a fake Leila, in a fake world. Moreover, if she was in the capital, he couldn't see her face or hear her voice like with Almaria. But, well, it was still nice to hear that Leila managed to live on a little longer.

"Hm? Are you interested in her?"

"In a general sense, yes. We were comrades after all, so it's only natural to wonder how she turned out."

"There you go again. No need to be shy. Love is the savior of this world, you know?" Navrutri gave Willem a hearty pat on the back. "Anyways, leave

Aly to me. Don't worry, I have the decency to at least wait until she's an adult."

Willem clenched his fist, preparing to unleash a slightly extreme attack he learned straight from the expert himself, Hilgram Moto.

"... okay okay, I'll stop, so relax that hand. That's the attack you used to defeat the Rust Dragon, right? If you hit me with that it'll hurt a lot, or more like I'll be sent flying, right!?"

Just then, Nephren, who was apparently released from the pack of mischievous little boys, entered the room and looked very, very confused.

Part 3: The Self Proclaimed Daughter and Self Proclaimed Pet

Almaria Duffner had a dream.

She stood upon a vast but empty gray land which stretched out in all directions forever and ever. Occasionally, unfamiliar beasts would sluggishly lumber by somewhere off in the corner of her field of view. The wind left a strange melody in her ears as it blew past.

The sight before her eyes should have seemed odd and foreign. However, she felt surprisingly calm. Not only that, but a sense of nostalgia welled up from inside her chest.

Ahh, that's right. This is where we belong. This is what we were meant to be.

A voice somewhere deep, deep within continued to whisper those words.

Almaria woke up.

Her heart was pounding violently against her ribcage.

She had the dream again. The same one which had haunted her time and time again since her childhood. Well, it wasn't exactly a nightmare. The scene was eerie, but it wasn't a bloodbath or anything. She just simply saw unexplainable things and felt unexplainable feelings. But that sensation… that sense of tranquility she felt inside the dream scared her more than anything. She felt like she became a completely different person, and yet felt no discomfort about it. That part frightened her every time.

That was her first time having the dream in a while. Long ago, when Almaria still lived in her parents' home, it occurred about once every half year. After losing her father and moving to the orphanage, it backed down to once a year. In recent years, its frequency had dropped even further, so this time it took her by surprise.

“A curse that puts you to sleep forever, huh…”

The rumors that Ted and Navrutri mentioned only amplified Almaria’s worries. They did reassure her that having the dream didn’t guarantee you were cursed, and that the relationship between the two phenomena still hadn’t been proved definitively, but her fear refused to go away.

I have to wake up early again tomorrow, so I need to get back to sleep, she thought. However, her rampant heart showed no signs of quieting down. Overcome by the thought of seeing that eerie landscape again if she fell back asleep, Almaria couldn’t even bring herself to shut her eyelids.

It was no use. Continuing to stir about restlessly in bed wouldn’t solve anything. Deciding to get some water and refresh her mood, she got out of bed and put on a cardigan. A small shiver ran throughout her body.

Upon reaching the living room, Almaria found a girl asleep on the sofa. Apparently, drowsiness had bested her as she was reading a book. The blanket

on top of her, which looked like it had been put there by someone else, was beginning to slip down.

“Nephren…”

As far as Almaria had heard, the girl was a Quasi Brave and one of Willem’s junior comrades. When she first arrived, she had been unfamiliar with the language of the empire, due to her being born in a faraway country. But she took her studies seriously, and in a mere few days she already learned how to make basic conversation. Nephren herself used the excuse that it was easy because the grammar closely resembled that of her native tongue, but, still, her progress seemed way too rapid. Maybe all Braves were like that.

Nevertheless, seeing her curled up on the sofa, fast asleep with a book in her arms, Almaria couldn’t see Nephren as anything more than a young child. She lightly patted Nephren’s gray hair. It was soft and warm. The hair of a child. She moved her finger down and was about to poke her squishy looking cheeks, when–

“No no.” Almaria faltered. “That’s right, the blanket. I have to fix the blanket or else she’ll catch a cold,” she told herself.

Just as Almaria was about to lay her hands on the blanket, Nephren opened her eyes. “… Almaria.”

“A-Ah. Did I wake you up?”

“Nnn…” Nephren looked around with sleepy eyes. “Was I asleep?”

“Sorry, I was just going to fix your blanket.” Almaria told a little lie. “Since you’re awake, you should go sleep in a proper bed. It’s pretty chilly tonight, so you’ll catch a cold out here.”

“Nn.” Nephren nodded, but didn’t stand up. Apparently, she was still half asleep.

“… I think I’m going to have some tea. Do you want some too?”

“Nn.” She nodded again, in the same drowsy manner.

She’s kind of like a puppy, Almaria thought.

And just like that, a peculiar little midnight tea party started. Almaria prepared a herbal tea which apparently had a soothing effect. She only bought the tea because someone recommended it to her, and she still didn't know the name of the leaf within, but it was just right for the two of them. For a snack, Almaria got out the special stash of cookies which she kept hidden deep within the cupboard. Nephren, apparently weak to hot drinks, blew repeatedly on her tea.

"Nephren, what relation do you have with our father?" Almaria asked suddenly. After the words left her mouth, she realized they sounded a little unfriendly. "... sorry, I could have phrased that better. I'm not accusing you of having that sort of relationship, it's just... how do I put it..." She had a difficult time finding the right words. "I heard you're his junior comrade as a Brave, but it feels like there's more than that."

Ever since she first laid eyes on her, Almaria could tell that Nephren was treated very importantly by

Willem. Nephren also seemed to treat Willem very importantly in return. Watching from the side, their mutual attitude of caring for each other seemed extremely natural, but it also didn't seem like a romantic relationship in any way.

"Nn…" Nephren thought for a bit. "Pet."

Pet. Upon hearing that unexpected word, Almaria's vague smile deformed into a dead serious expression. It looked like she had a little questioning to do with father about this situation.

"Willem looks like he would break if left alone, so it's my duty to stay beside him to prevent that. Recently, I've learned to maintain a distance just close enough that I might be considered a nuisance," Nephren elaborated.

"Ah… that's what you meant."

Almaria had imagined a slightly more radical situation after hearing the word pet, but apparently Nephren simply used it to mean an intimate friend. Relieved, her face relaxed into its previous smile. It

was easy to forget since they were having a normal conversation, but Nephren's skill with the Emnetwyte language was still very much at an elementary level. Almaria took that as an explanation for Nephren's odd word choice.

"But..." A faint, yet melancholy smile spread across Nephren's face. "Here, Willem is different. It doesn't look like he's going to break."

"... really?" Almaria, who had never seen Willem outside of the orphanage, had no way to compare his behavior.

"There probably isn't any need for me to stay by his side anymore."

"... do you really think so?" Almaria, who knew Willem in the orphanage very well, felt something wrong about Nephren's statement. "Knowing father, he'll probably leave and go off somewhere again soon enough. I can't go with him, and maybe, just like you said, he'll look like he's about to break again." Almaria poured herself another cup of herbal tea. "When that time comes, I'll have no

choice but to entrust him to you. Only you'll be able to take care of our pitiful, broken down father."

"... Almaria." Nephren seemed a little surprised. Even Almaria herself found the words coming out of her own mouth unexpected. "Nn. When that time comes, you can count on me." Faintly, yet strongly, Nephren nodded.

After their little tea party, Almaria cleaned up the dishes and returned to her room.

Just like always, Willem's surrounded by wonderful girls, she thought.

Now in a cheerful mood, she climbed into bed. Not much longer remained until daybreak, but she felt like this time, she would be able to sleep peacefully.

Part 4: The Adventurers

Originally, the majority of adventurers were actually just a reckless bunch, drunk on unrealistic dreams, who never had any sort of real training. Needless to say, they didn't enjoy a very stable lifestyle, and their general reputation in society leaned heavily towards the negative side. Furthermore, their survival rates for battles with Monstrous and whatnot were shockingly low.

Adventurer's guilds, organizations which coordinated the efforts of local adventurers, could pretty much be found in every moderately prosperous town across the continent. These operated financially independently from each other, but all the guilds were further coordinated by a superior organization, the Alliance. The level system, among other reforms, popularized by the Alliance helped turn the bunch of reckless, dreamy adventurers into trained explorers, stabilize their income, which used to be no more than a wild

gamble, and raise their miserable survival rate.

“A Brave…”

“It’s a Brave…”

“A Brave, huh…”

The secretive whispers spreading around the room reverberated annoyingly loudly in Willem’s ears. The stares thrown his way contained a mixture of jealousy, hatred, and admiration. At this point, he was used to such treatment, but still, it made him uncomfortable. Suppressing the urge to sigh heavily, Willem took a look around. Between ten and twenty men and women stood gathered in the wide entrance to Gomag’s only adventurer’s guild. Every one of them had their emotionally charged gaze fixed on Willem.

We’re really hated, Willem thought to himself as he smiled nervously. After all, society generally treated adventurers as hardly a step above unemployed ruffians. On the other hand, Braves were heroes who valiantly stood on the front lines to defend

humanity from the other races. Or at least, society treated them as such.

There was a flipside to this, however. More often than not, Braves didn't get to choose their battles. Their cause sounded righteous and glorious, but in the end they essentially just acted as mercenaries for the Church of Holy Light. Defeat or retreat were not options. They had no choice but to fight as ordered and win. Compared to the Braves, the adventurers seemed to live such a free and easygoing life.

Those are just two examples. Countless other differences which caused friction between the two groups existed. As a result, excluding a handful of exceptions who had experienced both sides like Navrutri, Braves and adventurers never got along very well.

"That's why I didn't really want to come..." Willem muttered. The hostile stares reminded him of the similar ones he used to receive as a markless back on the 28th Island. Trying to avoid eye contact with

anyone, he awkwardly looked up towards the ceiling and let out a small sigh.

"... Willem Kumesh." The receptionist called his name with a slightly shaky voice. "Your status as a Quasi Brave under the Church of Holy Light has been confirmed. We request your assistance with our upcoming series of missions."

"Ah, I'll do my best."

"S-Sorry for the trouble, but would you please sign these docume–"

"Hold on, hold on. Stop talking like that," Willem interrupted. "I mean, this guild is just a cheap bar that was remodeled. I can't imagine it's always so professional and businesslike in here. Right now, I'm just a fellow comrade helping out, so talk to me normally. Of course–" He turned his head over his shoulder. "– If you have something to say, say it with your mouth, not your eyes."

Ten or twenty people all averted their gazes. However, a single man kept his sight fixed straight

onto Willem.

“Okay, then I’ll go ahead and say it.”

The dark skinned giant of a man slowly stood up from his chair. Then, one heavy step at a time, he drew closer to Willem. He had such a stunning physique that Willem thought he was actually a Giant for a second, but, of course, he had to be human. At first glance, the man seemed to be walking casually, but, upon closer inspection of his subtle movements and the way he shifted his balance, Willem could tell that the man was no amateur.

“Just like you said, this guild is just a cheap bar that was remodeled. Can’t exactly call it a spectacular place. One dropped spoon can lead to a fistfight. Some days, more people spend the night in the police office or in a treatment facility than in their own homes. That’s the kind of place this is.”

“Hmm?”

Pretty lame threat, Willem thought. The man had the

vocabulary of a typical third rate hoodlum. After slightly admiring the man's skill at movement, Willem felt somewhat let down. Well, it didn't really matter.

Of course, people rarely get along well just because some higher up orders them to cooperate. This especially held true for the Braves and adventurers, whose default relationship started off in a pretty bad place. In Willem's experience, the best solution was to have a little pleasant exchange of opinions. A moderate exchange of fists never hurt either. Completely crushing the offending party's sense of pride only made things worse, however, so Willem needed to strike a delicate balance of force and restraint. The man walking up to him looked fairly tough. Willem could probably get away with a harder punch than usual. The hard part would be taking some punches and acting like they actually hurt, but making a light cut in his own mouth would likely suffice.

"And that's why," the man started talking again,

first glaring straight at Willem, then shifting his gaze to the spot beside Willem. “You can’t be bringing little kids in here. No one under fifteen is allowed to enter.”

“..... huh?”

“Also, bringing such a sweet, innocent looking girl... I don’t know what you were thinking, but it’s got to be bad for her education.”

Nephren tilted her head in confusion.

“Uhhh.” Willem looked around the room once more. About half of the crowd averted their eyes, and the other half nodded in unison. “Ah... right. I see your point. My bad.”

“Don’t apologize to me, apologize to that young lady.”

“O-Oh. Sorry, Ren. Can you wait outside for a bit?”

“Nn.” Nephren nodded and walked outside the guild as she was told.

Thirty minutes later, they were riding on a horse

drawn carriage which patrolled the city of Gomag. The wagon had room for four passengers, with all seats currently filled.

Nephren gazed at the scenery flowing by them with sparkling eyes. On the 68th Island, home to the fairy warehouse, just about all the carts were strictly for luggage purposes, not the kind which held passengers and zoomed by at high speeds. And as for airships, well, they could be treated as whole separate category. To Nephren, who grew up on the 68th Island, the landscape drifting by them as their carriage rattled along must have been fresh and exciting. If she had a tail, it would definitely be wagging back and forth vigorously. Gomag didn't even have anything interesting to see, so Willem couldn't imagine what she would be like if he brought her along to the capital.

He took his eyes off Nephren for the time being and faced forward, where Ted sat, exploding in laughter.

"... is it really that funny?"

“Of course it is. Ah, I wish I could have seen it myself. It’s too bad, I don’t think there’ll be another chance to see you like that for a while,” Ted responded.

Ever since hearing about the fiasco at the adventurer’s guild, Ted had remained in that state of perpetual amusement. Willem just wanted to punch him already.

“I overestimated the idiots defending Gomag’s peace. Never would have thought even the guild had become such a soft place.”

“Well, it’s only natural,” Ted said as he wiped tears from his eyes. “There aren’t any Mazes or strong Monstrous around here, so all the actually violent people quickly move away to a guild in some other city. The people left here are pretty much just normal people.”

“If they’re normal people, they should get a normal job instead of being an adventurer…”

“Normal people can have dreams of romance and

glory too."

... *ah, whatever*. Willem didn't want to drag around this embarrassment forever.

"Anyways, are you really a Quasi Brave?" The fourth passenger on the cart, a woman wearing a thin coat of red leather armor, asked with a suspicious glare.

She looked to be a little older than Willem, perhaps twenty or just above that. He had grown used to receiving inquisitive looks, but not from young ladies sitting very close to him.

"You're pretty skinny, and you kind of look spaced out all the time, and you don't have a special Kaliyon or anything," the lady continued, then turned to Nephren. "On top of that, you're bringing a kid to work. All in all, you don't seem very strong."

Willem knew very well that his exterior appearance lacked ambition or impact. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Hmm. Your response is kinda lacking too. That's not good. These days, passive guys can't get anything, you know?"

"... ah, well it's just part of who I am."

The lady looked rather concerned now. "The Brave I met before wasn't like this at all. She was really full of herself, saying 'I'll take care of this entire battle, so all weaklings stand back' and stuff."

"Ah..."

At any given time, there were usually around thirty Quasi Braves. Due to various circumstances, frequent switches occurred in the lineup. Also, since they were always fighting in various parts of the continent, the Quasi Braves never got the chance to get acquainted with each other very well. Nevertheless, Willem felt like he knew someone who would've acted like that.

"I knew she didn't mean to be hostile, and she was a lot stronger than us, but still, that kind of thing annoys me, you know?" The woman looked to Ted for agreement, who vaguely responded 'yeah' and shrugged his shoulders. "So when I heard we were going to be working with another Quasi Brave, I prepared myself for another really irritating

person, but then I get this nice, harmless guy. What am I supposed to do?"

"That's not my fault..." Willem muttered.

"Then who's is it?"

Who cares? Willem thought. "Quasi Braves are human too. They come in many different varieties."

"Hmph."

The wagon suddenly jolted violently. They must have ran over a rock or something.

"Okay okay, that's enough Lucie and Willem. Let's get to the main topic." Ted clapped his hands to break up their little conversation.

"I'm fine with changing the topic, but you taking charge kinda pisses me off," Lucie said.

"Yeah, seeing Ted trying to act cool always pisses me off," Willem added.

"So now you two suddenly start agreeing with each other? Anyway, just to confirm, our mission is to transport a comatose man to the city's treatment

facility, correct?"

"That's right." Lucie nodded. "His name is Odle N Gracis. 47 years old. Painter. Lives with his wife, who is two years younger. Today is his third day in a coma. His wife found him in that state two days ago in the morning, when she went to wake him up as usual."

Just then, a flock of doves flew past their carriage. Nephren's gaze followed the white crowd up into the sky.

"Um, Lucie, question." Ted raised his hand. "Did the wife say anything about Odle having weird dreams?"

"She did. Apparently he told his wife many times that he had an interesting dream. Gray as far as the eye can see, a vast desert..."

Willem dropped his eyes to the ground. Almaria said she saw the same scenery within her dream. Also... he couldn't be sure if this had any connection to the incidents, but Willem and Nephren knew that

scenery quite well. Except, they hadn't seen it in a dream, nor in this dream world, but in reality.

"… unfamiliar beast-like creatures roaming around that desert…"

Lucie's description of Odle's dream continued to match Almaria's, and, in addition, matched Willem and Nephren's real experiences.

"… also, he heard something like a song, apparently."

"Song?" A question unconsciously slipped out of Willem's mouth. As far as Willem knew, there were vast gray deserts and roaming Beasts on the land, but no songs.

"That's right. A song. He said he couldn't remember the tune or the lyrics, but it was definitely a song." Lucie glanced down at her memo pad. "Also, the desert and beasts and song all felt strangely nostalgic to him. Moreover, each successive time he had the dream, that nostalgia grew stronger and stronger."

“Do you think that dream and the sleeping curse are connected?” asked Ted.

“How am I supposed to know? With our current information, we could say anything, which means we really can’t say anything. Once the treatment facility carries out a thorough examination, we’ll have a little more to go off of,” Lucie answered, then turned to Willem. “And how about our seasoned Quasi Brave over here? Had any realizations listening to this so far?”

“Let’s see… the empire, Alliance, and Church have intelligence on the headquarters of True World, the group suspected to be behind this curse.”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

The two adventurers let out dumbfounded gasps.

“Why do you say that?”

“The coma incidents are occurring all throughout the continent. Despite that, the Alliance is only investigating empire territory. The Church added a

Quasi Brave to the investigation team here in Gomag, and the empire and Alliance agreed to that. There's something unnatural about that, right?" Willem explained to the pair, who still had their dumbstruck mouths wide open. "Those three must have information predicting armed resistance by True World and information adding credibility to that prediction."

"Why?"

"Braves fight to protect humanity as a whole. Or at least, that's what the Church advertises, and they're careful to act so that the commoners believe that too. But the Church took the trouble to get a Brave in on this mission. That means they're convinced this battle is going to become a large scale conflict. And since both the empire and Alliance accepted this demand, it's likely that they share the same conviction."

On top of all that, Navrutri, who was secretly investigating True World, just happening to be in Gomag seemed extremely suspicious to Willem. He

also recalled what the Great Sage, or Suwon, told him during their meeting up in the sky: the group that developed the Beasts set up their base in a small town on the outskirts of the empire. Of course, he couldn't tell this to the two sitting in front of him.

"W-Wait a second!" Lucie cut Willem off. "Y-You're joking right? No one told me this mission is that dangerous!"

"Well, you can tell the guild that afterwards and get an extra reward." Willem looked out the window of their wagon. "That's what most of the adventurers I've worked with did."

"... it's kind of late to be saying this, but, you really are a Quasi Brave, huh..." Ted's face looked like some great revelation had just struck him.

"What, Ted. You got something to say?"

"Ah no, I was just thinking, when you discover an unexpected side to someone close to you, it's hard to believe right away."

"I don't recall ever becoming close to you."

“I’m prepared for a long fight, so I’m fine with getting closer one small step at a time.”

“I don’t think you get my point.”

The carriage stopped abruptly.

“Looks like we’ve arrived. We need to walk from here,” Ted said as he opened the wagon’s door and stepped down onto the stone paving.

True World, huh. Willem repeated that nostalgic but detestable name inside his head a few times. They devastated the land. No one could do anything about that now. Even if Willem somehow managed to foil their plans in this dream world, it would have no effect on reality, in which all these events were already the ancient past. In the first place, he and Nephren were trying to find a way out of this world, and in order to do that they needed to focus on observation. It wouldn’t be wise to interfere too much with this world’s history. He understood that.

Willem understood, but he still accepted this mission. He did so because the stout hearted

Almaria showed her weak side, a rare occurrence. He definitely didn't fall for Navrutri's cajolery. *Well... now that it's come to this, I guess I might as well take it seriously*. From what he learned back when he and his comrades first crushed them, and from the explanations he heard upon taking this new mission, Willem had a basic understanding of True World.

Being a derivative group of the Church of Holy Light, they shared the same fundamental scriptures and, for the most part, the same beliefs. However, they added one extra bit to their teachings which proved to be enough to make them launch an armed assault against the empire. 'The current state of this world is not how it was meant to be'. That single sentence started it all. Following that teaching, they attempted to raze the mistaken world and restore it to its proper form. Truly a nuisance. Except, they actually succeeded in the end.

Odle's house turned out to be quite a walk from the carriage station. The four of them casually strolled

through a slightly disorderly residential area on the east side of Gomag.

"… oh?"

Willem spotted a roadside stand selling roasted chestnuts. Many chestnut trees grew in the forest surrounding Gomag, so if you simply gathered some, roasted them, and wrapped them in old newspaper, you could make pretty good business. Every autumn, similar stalls popped up all around town, spreading their delicious aroma throughout the streets. They mostly went away by wintertime, but a few always remained. They occasionally appeared out of nowhere and triggered your appetite, like what just happened to Willem. To residents of the town, roasted chestnuts were an annual happening, and Willem hadn't tasted them in two whole years.

"Wait here a sec," he told the others, then ran up to the stand. After checking the number of chestnuts roasting on the fire, he ordered four portions, then carried the fresh nuts bundled in old newspaper

back to the group.

“I don’t think it’s chestnut season anymore.”

“Who cares? I just wanted to eat them,” Willem said as he handed the chestnuts out. “They’re hot, so be careful.”

Silently nodding, Nephren opened her package. “Roasted… nuts?”

“I don’t care who you are, if you come to Gomag this time of year, there’s no way you can leave without eating these.” Willem grabbed one and stuffed it into his mouth. It was hot, and out of season, but still delicious as always.

Winter, huh. Willem suddenly remembered something. *Hey, it’s my birthday soon*. Well, not like it mattered. This world reaching the day seventeen years after Willem Kumesh’s birth didn’t have much connection with his actual self. In reality, he was already over five hundred years old, so he never really thought too much about his age.

Butter cake. The one you bake is pretty good. Make an

especially big one on my next birthday, will you?

Those words he once spoke popped into his mind abruptly, causing his hand to freeze as it grabbed another chestnut. *Ah, that's right*. The promise he couldn't keep. The thorn which pierced his heart that he couldn't remove for the longest time. After exchanging a new promise with Kutori and mutually fulfilling it, the pain from that thorn had finally faded away, along with Willem's memories of his old promise.

But the same was not true for Almaria. To her, not that much time had passed since they made that promise. It wasn't the distant past to her. Therefore, Willem's birthday being close also meant that the day their promise was to be fulfilled was close.

"Almaria…" An uneasy feeling scratched at the back of his mind. Something was off. He could feel it, but couldn't pinpoint the source.

"… you're pretty weird Willem," Ted said as he blew on a chestnut.

Willem was pulled out of his thoughts. “What are you talking about, all of a sudden.”

“Oh, it’s just I was expecting you to make a point of not giving me any chestnuts or something, but you handed them over without a word. I was a little surprised.”

Ah, damn it.

“… you wish you thought of that earlier, I’m guessing.”

“Nah, that’s not it. More like, if you want chestnuts, then give up on our daughter.”

“Hm? Are you sure it’s okay to say that? If I agreed, it would mean Almaria’s less valuable than roasted chestnuts.”

“I see your wit has grown sharper while I was gone.”

“Well, it’s fun to see you react.”

“Your personality has grown rotten too.”

“That’s what happens when a person can’t be in a relationship with his true love.”

Meanwhile, Nephren, who apparently stuffed her chestnuts into her mouth without waiting for them to cool down first, now had a bright red face and seemed to be in a daze. Lucie had to run off to the nearest public well and get some water for her. Watching Nephren make the classic beginner mistake, Willem recalled fond and nostalgic memories.

"Hey, Ted. I'm gonna ask you a weird question."

"What is it, Willem?"

"Hypothetically, if…" he faltered a bit. "… if I were to go off to a faraway battle and never return, would you bring Almaria happiness in my stead?"

Of course! Do you have plans to do that in the near future!? If so, leave it all to me! Oh, and by the way, is it okay if we name our kid after you!? Willem expected that kind of response.

"No."

"… huh?"

"No. I wouldn't want that. Even as a hypothetical

situation, I don't want to think about it."

"Why? Aren't I in your way?"

"Well, yeah, you are. I'm always thinking it would be nice if you just got kicked by a horse or something already. But this and that are different. I don't like making promises I can't keep."

"So you don't think you could make her happy?"

"Of course not," Ted responded nonchalantly. "To marry happily, she would need her beloved father's blessing. So until that happens, I need you to stick around. I said earlier, didn't I? I'm prepared for a long fight. Oh, of course, after the wedding, I wouldn't mind if you wanted to disappear right away. Actually, that would be desirable."

"I see."

Amidst the cold winter air, the freshly roasted chestnuts steadily lost their warmth. Willem grabbed three and tossed them into his mouth, trying to finish up before they all turned cold and hard.

“Soo, you have any plans to go fight somewhere faraway?”

“Hm… no, not really. I just wanted to ask.” That wasn’t a lie. But Willem’s words weren’t entirely accurate either. He had plans, but they had already been carried out. He really did go off to a faraway battle and never return. “… I plan to live for at least another five hundred years, so if you want my daughter, you’re gonna have to take her with your fists.”

Ted laughed cheerfully.

“I don’t really get what those guys are talking about, but… he has a grown daughter? How old is he?” Lucie asked Nephren.

After a bit of thought, she answered, “A little over 540.”

Lucie sighed.

Arriving at their destination, they rung the bell hanging outside the door. They could hear the high pitched sound echo throughout the interior, but no

footsteps.

"... no one seems to be coming."

"Guess she's not home. That's strange, she should have received contact from the guild."

Standing outside of this Odle fellow's house, the four of them looked at each other. To come all this way and not accomplish anything seemed kind of sad.

Lucie tried the doorknob. "Huh?" The door swung open. "It wasn't locked."

"Hm, she ought to be more careful. It's not that safe around here, is it?" Ted said.

"Well it's convenient for us. She might just be out for a little, so we can wait inside."

"Eh, w-wait!" Ted went after Lucie, who walked in without hesitation.

"Is this allowed in the Emnetwyte's social customs?" Nephren asked.

"It's kind of a gray zone," Willem answered, then

followed the others into the house.

As with most apartment complexes crammed into a rather small plot of land, Odle's residence didn't have many windows. Even with the sun high in the sky, a dark and gloomy interior greeted them, giving them the sort of chills different from those of the cold air outside.

Hm? Willem furrowed his brow. He sensed something odd. "Ren," he whispered. "Get ready."

Nephren seemed to understand what he meant with those two words. Her face tensed up, and, after adjusting her breathing, she began to lightly ignite Venom.

"Excuse me. Is anyone home?" yelled Lucie. She walked down the hallway, peeked beyond an open door, and said, "Mrs. Gracis? If you're home, please respon–"

Suddenly, without a sound, a blade closed in on her neck.

A clash of metal.

"... wha?" Lucie froze in shock.

A mere hair's length from the skin on the back of her neck, a lusterless black blade stood as if suspended in midair. Only a cheap knife, the kind handed out to all adventurers by the guild, blocked its remaining path to Lucie's neck. The knife, although suitable for clearing brush, cutting rope, or dissecting an animal, was by no means fit for battle.

Then, with a booming noise like a large hammer crashing into a wall, the black blade, along with the hooded figure gripping it, flew back with tremendous force.

"Eh?"

Slipping past the poor, confused adventurer, Willem dashed inside the room. In addition to the one he just struck, there were three other suspicious men, all with the same hooded cloak and black, curved blade. They moved towards Willem with steady and silent steps. Just from observing their movements, he could tell the three were

skilled.

This knife is no good. Willem had borrowed it from Ted's belt, but that clash with the black blade already took a heavy toll on it. One more time, and it would snap in half. Accordingly, he tossed it off to the side.

Willem ignited a faint amount of Venom and turned on his spell vision. Nothing. Which meant, the men weren't wielding Venom or any magic of the sort. That's all he needed to know. He took a deep breath, held it — then took off.

In the next instant, one of the men flew up and smashed into the ceiling with an explosive noise and enough force to crack the wooden boards. Instinctively, the other men looked up towards him. Using that brief opportunity, Willem blended his body in with the shadows, snuck up in one of the men's blindspot, and sharply grasped his neck.

Just one more. With a small breath and a barely audible sound, Willem closed the distance at incredulous speed, crashed into the last remaining

man, and drove his fist into his target's side. Then, suddenly, a black blade glided through the air where Willem's head had been just a split second ago. He managed to barely dodge in time. The tip of the blade caught onto a button right below his neck and sent it flying.

Did he read my Nightingale Dash? It wasn't too surprising. After all, Nightingale Dash was a rather well known technique. Not many could use it, but everyone knew it's name and what it did. Anyone training in man to man combat above a certain level would likely learn how to deal with an opponent who had mastered Nightingale Dash, even if they couldn't use it themselves. Willem thought he saw the hooded man give a smug smile.

He took off again. His initial movements almost exactly matched what he just did. Instinctively, the man prepared for a Nightingale Dash and brought his blade down upon Willem's predicted path. Then, after a strong blow from behind, the man fell unconscious.

Willem wasn't nice enough to use the same move twice in a row. The technique he just used was a 'Blazing Sun Dash' disguised as a Nightingale Dash at first. Usually, one soldier did not utilize more than one different dash technique. The man probably never got the chance to figure out how Willem got behind him.

With a clank, Ted's knife that Willem threw away earlier finally hit the ground.

Lucie dropped to the floor, still in shock.

"What was that noise just now!?" Ted ran into the room in a panic.

Nephren suppressed the Venom she had ignited with a sour face, displeased that she didn't get a chance to do anything.

Willem expelled the tension built up in his body together with a sigh. It was by no means a tough fight, but it definitely could've been a bit easier. If Navrutri, who had mastered the Blazing Sun Walk, were in the same situation, he probably would've

dealt with all three of them on the first blow. Suwon would've had a binding spell on all of them in one instant. Hilgram would've made them all faint with one battle cry. Emissa... probably would've blown them and the entire room away with a Venom explosion.

Willem, who didn't have any special moves like them, had no choice but to deal with each encounter one by one with a combination of modest techniques. As a result, he worked hard to build up a good variety. Situations in which one or two techniques didn't work presented no problem, and eventually he became able to perform close to optimally no matter the battlefield. His results shot up, and people even started to call him 'the strongest Quasi Brave', which Navrutri used to tease him about.

But in the end, that style of fighting never allowed him to cross over the wall which towered above him. He could only continue to change techniques or change equipment and jump over and over in

futile attempts to even get a glimpse of the other side. No matter how skillfully he mastered the things he was capable of, he never became able to do the things which he couldn't do from the start. No matter how thoroughly he could defeat those weaker than him, the truth remained that he could never achieve victory against those who wielded true strength.

Of course, Willem knew that having a pessimistic attitude toward such things did no good. Wishing for that which he did not have wouldn't change anything. Work which required that level of strength could be left to those who possessed that level of strength. Simple, and logical. That's how the world worked. Willem understood that, because that day, that day he first took up a sword, wishing that one day he would become able to protect his precious family, he became an adult.

"W… wow…" Lucie's voice brought Willem back to the present.

"C-Could these guys be from that True something or

other!?" Ted exclaimed.

Surprisingly, Ted caught on fast. He unsheathed his sword and kept vigilant. *Not bad, level 8*, Willem thought. Unfortunately, however, the battle was already over.

"Ted." Willem gestured for Ted to put his sword back away. "Your work is over there."

Over in the corner of the room, an old lady sat trembling in fear.

"Ah… are you Mrs. Gracis?" Ted asked.

The old lady nodded vigorously.

"Oh, that's a relief." Ted smiled. "We've come from the guild to pick up your husband. It's safe now, so please relax. Once you're ready, do you mind telling us everything that happened in detail?"

The cautiousness in the old lady's eyes faded away. Ted was courteous and good with words. No matter how many battle techniques he mastered, Willem could never match Ted in that department.

They returned to the guild with the comatose Odle N Gracis. Along the way, they turned in the attackers, all bound in rope, to the police. According to Odle's wife, just before Ted and the others arrived, those men somehow entered the locked door without a sound, then held her down while they tried to take her sleeping husband. In other words, if the adventurers had arrived just slightly later, the men, along with Odle, would have been nowhere in sight. As the weeping wife told her story, she repeatedly thanked the gods for their blessings of good fortune.

Willem figured blessings of the gods had nothing to do with it, but he kept that to himself. The Visitors of old were long gone. The only surviving one, Elq Harksten, also perished recently at the hands of the Regal Brave after trying to annihilate humanity. So no matter how devoutly people believed in them or prayed to them, no one would be there to listen anymore.

"Were those enemies strong enough that a Brave

was necessary?" Lucie asked.

"Well, they might have been a bit strong for your average adventurer, don't you think?"

"More like, if you weren't there I definitely would've died."

Hmm, I wonder. Willem didn't feel the intention to kill in those men. Even if he didn't stop that blade which swung at Lucie's neck, it probably would have stopped after just slightly making contact with her skin. Well, that wouldn't have changed the fact that the man could've easily ended her life.

"Are you mad that I got you involved in that dangerous mess?"

According to Willem's experience, this was the largest contributor to the friction between the adventurers and Braves. Having a Brave present on the battlefield signified great danger ahead, and danger always numbs logical judgement. The adventurers saw the Braves as a sort of jinx and despised them as the main source of danger. For

example, if a casualty arose before the Brave arrived on the battlefield, no matter how valiantly that Brave fought afterwards, the responsibility of the death would be put on him. People would all blame him for showing up too late. And of course, they didn't allow any disagreement or argument from the Brave. Willem himself never exactly got used to it, but he had learned to accept it as a common occurrence.

"No, I'm the one who got saved, so I don't have anything to be mad about," Lucie responded casually. "Also, to be honest… I thought you kinda looked cool back there." She averted her eyes, and her cheeks blushed red ever so faintly. "Ah, sorry. I don't have a crush on you or anything. You seem hard to get, and you have a big daughter apparently, and, more than anything, you don't look like the type who would be able to become happy with me." Lucie elaborated her cruel evaluation of Willem with a laugh.

Willem found her criticisms surprisingly easy to

accept. In fact, he thought they described him rather accurately. He was always wishing to bring happiness to someone else, but did he ever wish for anyone to bring him happiness in return?

If I could do anything to give you happiness five, ten years down the road, then that would make me happy too. That's the number one reason why I wouldn't mind being together with you.

Willem recalled those words that Naigrat once said to him. At that time, he couldn't bring himself to accept her favor. Unable to directly face Naigrat's strong will, her will to bring none other than Willem Kumesh happiness, he returned the cruelest possible answer, asking her if he could pretend he hadn't heard any of what she said. He knew that Naigrat would simply laugh it off, no matter how cruel. He took advantage of that.

"U-Um? Did I say too much? Did I bring back bad memories or something?" Lucie asked, confused at his silence.

"No, it's not that," Willem answered with a vague

smile. “You have a good eye for people. Everything you said is probably spot on.”

Before they left the Gracis’ house, they had inspected Odle’s body, with permission from his wife. The results didn’t turn out as expected, to say the least. No matter how strongly Willem activated his spell vision, he couldn’t find any traces of any kind of curse. He applied pressure to various spots and checked the man’s eye movements, but still failed to uncover any irregularities. Odle appeared exactly as if he were simply sleeping peacefully.

“If he’s the victim of a curse experiment, there’s no way I wouldn’t be able to detect any spell power. It’s possible that his coma is natural, and not connected in any way to the curse spreading around,” he muttered. “In that case, the spreading of the curse must really be random, and not even True World knows who’s affected and who’s not. Maybe the attackers couldn’t get information on the coma victims themselves, so they had to steal information from the guild and act on that. Or it could be the

work of the traitor that Navrutri mentioned…"

"Willem."

"Or maybe the Beasts are their real research, these coma incidents are just uncontrollable byproducts, and they were trying to collect samples to figure out how to stop it? That seems plausible, but then why would the dream be about the future land?"

"Willem."

"Are they giving predictive powers to a large number of random people? I have no idea why they would do that, but just looking at the results that possibility can't be ruled out. Damn, we need more clues… ow!?' Willem received a sharp pinch in the buttocks from Nephren. "What was that for?"

"It's your fault for not responding when I call your name," she replied in a grumpy voice.

"Do you want something?"

"Of course. Don't think alone." Nephren lightly grabbed onto just the tip of his sleeve.

“That’s unusual of you. You’re always clinging onto me without hesitation.”

“That’s only when you look like you’d break if I left you alone.”

Willem felt like she said that to him before. “So, why are you holding back now?”

“… you look like you wouldn’t break, even if I left you alone.”

“Hm?”

“I’m the only one that would break.”

“What are you saying?”

“… nevermind. Forget it.” Nephren walked alongside him, holding onto his sleeve.

“Okay…” Willem grabbed Nephren and drew her closer, causing a small yelp. “Haha. You’re warm as always.”

“… I’m not a hand warmer.”

“I know, I know.” Willem almost gave Nephren’s hair a good ruffle, but decided to stop.

Apparently giving up on trying to escape, she kept close to Willem, then looked up and asked, “So did you figure out who’s having the dream?”

“Hm? Oh, well, so far we know Aly, that Odle guy, and… I think there was a list back in the guild.”

“Not that.” Nephren shook her head. “This world is someone’s dream. But this world couldn’t have been made with your memory. It must be someone far more familiar with this town. That’s what you said, right?”

Ah.

“Did you forget?”

“No, it’s not that…”

The fake Gomag around them resembled the real one extremely closely. Even the minutest of details which no one would ever pay attention to were spot on. The more they researched and spent time in the village, the more evidence they found for that statement.

The problem might be with the assumption that this is

based off of only one person's memory. Taking into account the town's accuracy and all the books Nephren was scouring, it would make more sense to think of this world as a sort of jigsaw puzzle of many different people's memories. Whether or not that was logically possible made for an entirely different question.

Hmm. This world couldn't have been made with just one person's memory. Even with two or three people, it probably still wouldn't be enough. But what about hundreds of memories? Or even thousands? The population of Gomag hovered at around three thousand back then. Would all of their collective memories not be enough to almost perfectly recreate the town?

"... no way..."

It seemed like a ridiculous proposition. But at the same time, it would explain so many of the peculiarities they had noticed. For example, every one of the townspeople seemed to hold their own individual willpower because they were all at one

point trapped here, just as Willem and Nephren currently were. And the reason why they weren't conscious of that fact themselves was because they had already long since become residents of this dream world. It all made sense.

A typical devil usually only trapped one individual in their dream worlds. Occasionally they trapped a few people all at once, but they had a limit. If Willem's new hypothesis were true, a being with a truly terrifying amount of power must have created this world.

But what is their goal? They had yet to see any devil-like traps designed to break their will. The series of events involving True World looked sort of like a trap, but it was too indirect. In fact, Willem got the impression that the opposite held true: their enemy was purposely refraining from any action, leaving history to play out as intended in order to protect the consistency of the world. But what meaning lay behind that?

Could that be their entire goal? To simply let this world

play out according to history? No. Calm down and think. That couldn't be right. After all, Willem and Nephren's presence already tainted the historical integrity of this world. Any interactions between them and the villagers would never have happened in reality.

"... even if this is a dream, even if this is fake, Almaria and the others are here, huh."

"Nn?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking it's about time to start causing some trouble."

With their current information, they had no way to determine their enemy's aims. They couldn't even discern whether their trapper was trying to maintain history or alter it. Therefore, it made no sense to sit around pondering needlessly. They could take the initiative by changing history themselves. For example, today's incident with True World. Without their interference, those men would have succeeded in obtaining Odle. Their failure to do so likely set True World's research back

a fair bit compared to actual history. In order to shatter this illusion of a world and return to reality, Willem and Nephren first needed to save it.

— Willem suddenly felt a pair of eyes on the back of his neck. He turned around, but failed to spot any acquaintances or strangers looking his way amidst the bustling evening crowds. Perhaps it was just his imagination. “Willem?” Nephren asked.

“… ah, my bad.”

His mind had probably just gotten worked up after a long day of fighting and thinking. Kind of like how after watching a horror crystal movie, even the slightest flutter of a curtain seemed like the movements of a terrifying monster stalking him. His peaceful days upon Regul Aire must have stolen the battlefield presence of mind which he had accumulated over his years as a Quasi Brave.

“It’s getting chilly out here. Let’s head home.”

“Nn.”

Blending in with the hectic crowd of people

hurrying home, the two made haste on their way back to the orphanage under the swiftly sinking winter sun.

Part 5: The Scarlet Haired Girl

The girl just barely avoided being spotted. She pressed her palm over her rapidly pulsing chest. Deep breath. Deep breath. Gradually, her breathing and heartbeat came under control. Hiding in the shadows, she desperately tried to calm herself down.

“What’s wrong? Standing still and hiding all of a sudden.” A woman’s voice sounded from the seemingly empty space beside the girl’s ear. Then, the air in front of the girl flickered, and, just like a colored liquid filling a clear glass, a fish like creature with translucent red and silver scales revealed itself. The flying fish, whose voice did not depend on physical sound, whispered to the girl again. “… that boy you were just looking at seemed a little strange. The color of his soul hadn’t disappeared. It seems unlikely that he would still be connected with his actual body, though.”

"... impossible ..."

"Oh? Why are you blushing? He did have decent looks. Did you fall for him?"

"No, no that!" The girl turned to face the fish. "It was Willem! He shouldn't be here!"

"Willem? ... ah, that Second Technician who that girl met up in the sky?"

The young girl, her face now deeply flushed red, nodded vigorously.

"Well, in that case, he might be the reason why time in this world suddenly started moving again last week."

"Probably..."

"Wonderful! He's really strong isn't he? I'm assuming he also wants to get out of here, so if we reveal our identities, he might help us!"

"That won't work. He probably really hates me." The girl clenched her fists. "If he finds out who I am, it'll cause him great suffering."

"... how did your relationship get this bad before you even met him for the first time?" The fish said as she shook her tail fins. "Well if you say so, then I guess we'll have to do it by ourselves. It looks like the dates are a bit off, but pretty soon *that day* will come to this world. When it happens, we need to find your body and release it." With that, the flying fish traced out a circle in the sky with a dance and disappeared, seemingly melting into thin air.

"Okay." As she answered, the young girl cautiously peeked out from the shadows of the small alley where she stood. She searched for a particular young man amidst the bustling evening crowds, but couldn't find him anywhere. He must have walked off somewhere already.

"You're interested in him, aren't you?" The fish, although now formless, still whispered to the girl.

"... not really. He's not even that handsome. I don't have bad taste like Kutori." The girl shook her head and went back into the alley.

"All you care about is looks, huh."

Soon enough, the rapidly descending evening darkness enveloped the girl in shadow.

Chapter 4: The Shiantor, Lamenting First Beast



Part 1: The First Person

You want to become a Brave?

Willem still remembered his master's expression when he first brought the subject up. It looked happy, sad, amused, and disgusted all at the same time. Looking back, Willem realized he could now understand about half of the emotions mixed into that complicated face. For example, whenever Falco declared 'I'm going to become a Brave too', the jumbled mess of feelings that welled up in his heart were surely the same ones that his master felt back then. The joy of seeing Falco aspiring to be like Willem, his father figure. The sorrow of knowing that the brilliant, glorious image of the Braves which Falco held in his heart would soon be dirtied and destroyed. The frustration of watching him choose such a dangerous path over so many other options. The heart warming sensation of seeing a young, innocent boy chase his dreams.

You want to protect home? You idiot, if you want to protect this place, there are millions of other options. Why do you have to choose the most troublesome one?

But still, Willem felt that something was different. His master had carried a far greater variety of emotions than Willem.

Alright, alright. I'll teach you. I'll become your master. But, I don't think you're cut out for it. I'm gonna take off running with the intention of making you quit, so do your best to keep up!

His master's words turned out to be so right it hurt. Willem Kumesh had no talent, and he hardly mastered any of the techniques that former Regal Brave Nils D Foreigner taught him. The only Kaliyons he could activate were the lowest rank mass produced ones. On top of that, the disciple that barged in afterwards, that rude little girl named Leila, had literally everything which Willem lacked. She mastered the all powerful way of the sword characteristic of the Braves and even activated the notoriously stubborn Seniolis like it was nothing.

It's okay to give up, you know? You can stop doing what you're not mean to do and go back home to the orphanage.

At that moment, his master seemed to be neither happy nor sad, neither scolding Willem nor taking pity on him. Emotions completely unknown to Willem stirred in his master's eyes as he talked to him with a gentle, yet bitter, smile.

A modest promenade stretched alongside the waterways flowing through the city of Gomag. During the day, it served as a popular place of respite for the citizens. Some went for leisurely walks, some jogged, some rode out on small boats to enjoy the view, some played cheerful songs on the violin in hopes of receiving donations, and some set up an easel and worked to capture the beautiful scenery on canvas. But when the sun sank below the horizon, they all left for home. Now, with the stars twinkling brightly above, only a lone man sat on a bench, gazing up at the moon as he sipped a bottle of beer.

“I’ve been looking for you, Navrutri,” Willem called out to the man, who slowly turned his way.

“Hey, Willem. What a strange place to meet.”

“That’s because you picked a strange place to be.” Willem took a seat next to Navrutri. “You don’t look like your usual drunk self.”

“I just can’t seem to get used to this empire alcohol. No matter how much I drink, it doesn’t cheer me up.”

“Is that really the alcohol’s fault?”

“Well, the fault might lie with me, but it doesn’t make a difference. There’s no connection between me and this alcohol. That’s all.” As Navrutri spoke, he gave the not yet empty bottle a light toss. A few seconds later, a small splash sounded from the shadow enshrouded waterway.

“There’s a fine for littering, you know.”

“When the town hall opens I’ll go pay it.”

Willem sighed. Of course, he didn’t seek Navrutri

out to talk about beer. “I looked into various things regarding True World.” Staring blankly at the black surface of the water, he began. “Roughly speaking, a religion is a set of common knowledge and values for people to share. It’s only natural for one to not be able to trust someone else with different values. So those with different religions see each other as irregular and unending conflict arises. To prevent that, countries set an official religion and standardize their peoples’ beliefs.”

Navrutri simply nodded vaguely.

“The followers of True World share the common belief that the world is not the way it was meant to be. Because of their far out convictions, it’s almost impossible for them to converse with regular people, so they come into conflict with those around them. Only those with the same beliefs understand them. As a result, bonds among them strengthen, while friction with others increases. Somewhere along the way, they started to think that they need to purge the non believers who fail to see the truth

and restore the world to its proper form."

Willem took a small breath. "... or, that's what everyone falsely believed."

Navrutri's eyes shuddered slightly. "Go on."

"From the outside, everyone just saw a bunch of weird guys. But in reality, there were different types of people in True World. They all shared the same basic belief that the world is not the way it was meant to be. But after that, there were two branches. One group believed the world needed to be returned to its original state, and the other wanted to maintain the current, mistaken world. When True World began 97 years ago, the founder supported the latter belief. In other words, the original True World never wished to give the world a big makeover. Am I right?"

"At the very least, there aren't any contradictions with the information that I have. Is that it?"

"No. That was just to confirm my assumption that there are two opposing factions within True World.

My real question comes next." Willem took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. With his gaze still fixed on the water, he asked, "Which faction do you belong to, Navrutri?"

A long silence descended between them.

"How did you know?"

"Oh, what? You really do belong to them? That was just a guess."

"... Willem?"

"That was half a joke, don't make that face. Anyways, the guys trying to kidnap that comatose man at the exact same time as us seemed suspicious, so I looked into all the paths by which information leaves the guild. Eventually I found a record of some guy extracting information through a fishy route, and following the clues let to your name.

Also, you said you were suspecting the other Quasi Braves, yet you didn't seem to have any intention of leaving Gomag, where the only other Quasi Brave is me. Which means, you knew it wasn't actually

necessary to investigate the identity of the traitor."

"That hardly seems like enough evidence to deem me guilty."

"Like I said, I was half joking, which means half of it was really just a guess."

A small splash, probably from a fish or something, resounded through the quiet night air.

"Well? Did you not consider that I might silence you after having my identity revealed? I'm pretty good at assassination, you know?"

"I think you already know, but I'm pretty good at retaliating against assassins," Willem said with a laugh. "Besides, you told me, didn't you? That it's your job right now to doubt your comrades. That means it's not my job to doubt you. I couldn't imagine you resorting to assassination, True World or not."

"Reckless as always."

"Well, it made sense in my head."

Navrutri shrugged. “I belong to the faction trying to maintain this world. We’re currently in conflict with the guys who want to give the world a big makeover, as you put it. There’s not much more I can tell you, but do you have any questions?”

Willem thought for a bit. Of course, there were numerous things he wanted to know. However, among them, only a few seemed to be worth asking Navrutri.

“The ‘way the world is meant to be’ that you guys speak of… is it a desolate gray plain where only strange beasts roam?”

“Correct. The original world scenery.”

“And what about such a bleak world is so desirable to the other faction?”

“Various things. Some want to utilize the beasts and destruction for war, and some are just convinced that things need to be the way they were meant to be. To borrow your words from earlier, those are their common beliefs.”

“Do you think you can stop them?”

“That…” Navrutri opened his mouth to say something, but, after a brief pause, closed it again.

“Navrutri?”

“… there’s no need to stop them. Their main strength was crushed two years ago. All that’s left are people who used to be no more than underlings and very few resources. They won’t be able to do anything serious anymore.”

What is he talking about? Willem thought. *Can’t do anything serious? What about the chain of comas they’re causing as we speak?*

“No matter what sort of schemes they’re planning, destruction will come soon enough,” Navrutri said with a casual tone unfitting of his enigmatic words. “What the human race needs now are the soul fragments of the Visitors. Our preparations to replenish them are underway. All I can say is that we’ll try to make it in time.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

"... well, basically we're fighting as best as we can. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything more detailed than that." Navrutri showed Willem a vague smile.

"Can I trust you?"

"It's not your job to doubt your comrades, is it?"

After being told that, Willem found it hard to pursue the question any further. "Is there anything I can do?"

"If you just trust me and wait, that's good enough. I know you're strong, but this is a problem that can't be resolved with strength — ah." Navrutri, seeming to have remembered something important, turned towards Willem. "There's just one thing I wanted to ask you. Do you know where Nils went off to?"

"That good for nothing master?" A strange question to be asked all of a sudden, but Willem answered. "I heard he went to the capital a while back, but nothing after that. I suppose he'll abruptly appear at home with the worst timing like he always does, but why do you ask?"

“If you don’t know then that’s fine. If he comes back, let me know as soon as possible,” Navrutri said, then stood up. “I’m sure he knows how to save this world from the end.”

Part 2: The Adventurers of the Guild

A peculiar rumor began to make its way throughout the public treatment facility in Gomag. People spoke of a strange song that could be heard in the special ward at night. The voice apparently sounded like a man's yet also a woman's at the same time, and a child's yet also an elder's at the same time. The song sounded somewhat like an exaltation of love yet also somewhat like a lament of homesickness. Every night, that enigmatic melody resounded out from somewhere within the shadows.

Of course, many suspected that one of the patients was the mysterious singer. However, the only current residents of the special ward were five men and women, all deep in a coma of unknown cause. Furthermore, those five happened to be targets of some strange cult, so heavy security surrounded the building around the clock, effectively making it

impossible for any outsider to enter unnoticed.

That left only one conclusion: the patients, sucked into dreams of a vast ashen world, were singing in their sleep, trying to drag those around them into that same dream with their evocative yet repulsive melody…

“Stop talking about that!” Lucie said with a shiver. “I’m going to be on guard tonight! You’re gonna pay big time if I see ghosts or something!”

“Ah, it’s just so fun seeing you react like that I couldn’t help myself,” Ted said with a hearty laugh before receiving an iron fist in the nose and toppling over.

“If you keep teasing girls like that, you’ll experience real pain soon enough.”

“I think any proper girl would classify that punch just now as real pain.” Ted received a stone cold glare. “Never mind.”

Naturally, there was no shortage of similar ghost stories associated with the hospital. Someone made

up a story of a misfortunate girl who died while longing for her fiance the day after strong winds blew, and all the patients gossiped about it as if it were true. There was also a legend of a mysterious white cloaked man with a hatred for all life who appeared the day after the curtains on the second floor were changed to white, and all the kids talked about it excitedly.

So in other words, Lucie probably had nothing to worry about. The song might've just been the wind whistling through the windows, or the meowing of a stray cat, or the loud humming of someone living closeby. There might've been nothing supernatural about it. But still, she always had a weakness for scary stories.

"Ugh... maybe I'll just bring ear plugs."

"You're supposed to be guarding the building, so that probably wouldn't be a good idea."

"And who do you think is making me worry so much!?"

The two of them sat at a table in the corner of the adventurer's guild, sipping on cheap wine, waiting for night to come.

The investigation into the coma incidents still hadn't progressed very much. The victims only continued to gradually increase without rhyme nor reason. They shared no common background or lifestyle in particular, and no trends in age groups or gender could be observed.

Clues as to the whereabouts of True World's headquarters were still virtually nonexistent as well. A mere three thousand people lived in the small town of Gomag, so where on earth could they have been hiding? Or in the first place, was their headquarters even in the town?

Those men they fought earlier remained silent ever since their capture. Torture and other such methods were banned under an international charter, so they could do absolutely nothing as long as the men refused to talk. After that battle, seeing how the coma victims showed no signs of stopping,

everyone had prepared for another similar encounter. Their preparations turned out to be pointless, but the absence of another kidnapping attempt seemed like it could be a useful hint.

Recently, Lucie had stopped seeing that young Quasi Brave, since he deemed the danger of the situation to be moderate enough that the adventurers could handle it by themselves. Apparently busy with investigations of his own, he also stopped showing up at the guild.

"... so about that Willem guy..." Lucie broke the silence.

"Yeah?" Ted responded.

"He's not married, right?"

"Nope. He does have a lot of kids in a sense though, being the effective manager of the orphanage and all."

Kids, huh. Taking another sip of wine, Lucie thought for a bit. She was never very good with kids.

"Oh, but apparently there are a lot of girls he's close

with. And some of them are super famous too," Ted added on.

"Hmm? Like who?"

"I've heard that the Regal Brave Leila Asprey is a disciple of the same master as Willem."

Aglhgh. The wine went down the wrong way.

"Also, as for people that us adventurers know, he's fought with Emissa Hodwin and Kaiya Kaltran more than just a few times."

"T-The over level 30 people!?"

Since the adventurers used level as a way to roughly judge others' strength, those with a ridiculously high level naturally became well known amongst them.

"Willem's over 30 too, according to him."

"... ughh..." Lucie didn't find it hard to believe. Although she only saw him fight once, his skill that battle seemed overwhelming. "W-What does he think? Did he say anything about who he wants!?"

“The other day, he said he found a really nice girl and proposed.”

Damn it. Lucie rammed her forehead against the table.

“I didn’t ask who it was, but it seemed like someone we don’t know.”

“Ahhh… well I guess I don’t stand a chance then…”

“Personally, I can’t really recommend him. If word gets out that you have a boyfriend, the floor of the guild will probably run red with blood.” Ted turned around. Immediately, about ten guys all readjusted their seat, opened a book, took a drink, or gazed out the window, pretending to not be eavesdropping. “I’m after Almaria so I don’t really care, but there are a lot of guys here that want you, you know? Not sure what it would be like to see them all crying.”

In Lucie’s opinion, if those guys hadn’t tried approaching her at all yet, they effectively weren’t even after her. Their crushes were no more than shallow admiration. So, most likely, they would all

end up crying anyways. The only difference was whether that would be now or later.

“And what am I supposed to do about my urge to cry right now?”

“Devote yourself to work and forget about it. That sounds like a good plan.”

“Work…”

The cuckoo clock on the wall made its silly little sounds. The time for the guards at the public treatment facility to change shifts was drawing nearer.

“… waaah.” Lucie threw her head down onto the table once again.

“It’s okay. Ghosts aren’t real.”

“If anything happens to me, the first thing I’m gonna do is curse you!”

“I’m telling you, nothing’s going to happen. That story is just a rumor. Come on, get up and work.”

“Noo, no scary things! I want to go home!”

Part 3: For Whom

Almaria caught a cold.

"... I have to get dinner ready." She stood up, determined to do housework.

"Sleep." Willem urged her back into bed. "Nanette's in the kitchen preparing dinner right now, so don't worry about that."

"She can't do it alone."

"She's always helping you, isn't she? She'll be fine. Ren's with her too, so you don't need to worry about Nanette touching fire or hurting herself with a knife." *You might need to worry about the flavor though,* Willem thought, but he kept that to himself.

"But..."

"You need to rest once in awhile. Your body has never really been that strong, right?" "Well... that's true..." Almaria still didn't look fully convinced, but she stopped arguing and lay her head back down on

her pillow. “This is kind of nostalgic.”

“What is?”

“Me being sick, and you staying beside me.”

Willem thought back. If he remembered correctly, such a situation hadn’t happened in a long, long time.

“Hey… do you mind spoiling me once in awhile?” Almaria asked.

“Hm?”

“If I say ‘don’t go’ again, would you grip my hand like you did before?”

This is unusual, Willem thought. Almaria was strong. She never complained, never showed off her hard work, and never let others see her in moments of weakness. For her to be saying something like that…

“Do you want me to hold it?”

“Nn. I’m kind of in the mood for that right now.” Almaria’s hand crawled out from under the rustling

blankets.

With a light sigh, Willem wrapped his hand around hers. “We can’t let the others see this.”

“Ahaha. Falco might try to imitate me.”

“That boy… he needs to hurry up and decide whether he wants to act strong or be spoiled.”

“He has his own problems to struggle with. Did you know? When you’re not around, he’s working hard to become a Brave.”

“Oh, really?”

The Braves in storybooks stood bravely on glorious battlefields, cut down their wicked foes, and married beautiful princesses. Any boy, or even some girls, would admire that life. Willem thought that such admiration was important, but also, he believed that admiration needed to stay as mere admiration, not as a motivator to actually chase those idols. Willem, once an ordinary boy like all the others, also admired the Braves from a young age and aspired after them. Only after he actually

grasped that dream did he realize this.

“Are you scared to sleep?”

“Just a little,” Almaria said with a nervous smile. Willem could feel her hand shaking slightly. “I feel like I might not be able to wake up ever again.”

In the past few days, the rumors of the ashen dream had grown more widespread, little by little. The rumors had grown more frightening too. Apparently, those who repeatedly had the dream eventually became sucked into it, never to awake again.

“Well there’s no point in worrying about it so much that you can’t sleep and get yourself sick.”

“That’s true, but still, it’s easier said than done.”

“You’re thinking about it too much. Forget it and sleep.”

“Oookayy.” Almaria smiled. “Hey, father.”

“What is it?”

“Since you came home, everyday has been super

fun."

"Really?"

"Nephren's cute too. She's a good kid."

"Mhm."

"But things can't stay like this forever, can they?"

... *of course not*. Willem and Nephren couldn't stay in this world forever. They needed to escape before the Beasts appeared and slaughtered them. And, needless to say, when that time came, they would need to leave the residents of this dream behind. Almaria. Ted. Lucie. Falco. Nanette. Wendel. Marlies. Meanae. Dettloff. Horace. Close friends. Strangers. They would have to abandon everyone.

"We're going to need to go somewhere far away again soon." Willem tightened his grip on Almaria's hand. "But we'll come home again. I promise." *What a liar*. "I'll bring back some more comrades next time. I know a few that you'd get along with." *Another lie*. "So don't worry. I've never broken a promise, have I?"

Of course, this last one was the biggest, most blatant lie of them all. It almost made him want to laugh. He never came home after departing to eliminate the Visitors. The history of this world might have been rewritten, but Willem clearly remembered the reality: he never fulfilled that promise.

"... no you haven't." Almaria looked at Willem with a gentle smile, like a saint forgiving a sinner.

"So don't worry about weird rumors and get to sleep."

"Nn." She nodded and closed her eyes.

Slowly, Willem let go of that warm hand.

"Father."

"What is it?"

"See you tomorrow."

"– Yeah. Good night."

Willem left the room and shut the door behind him.

Surprisingly, a delicious smell wafted throughout

the kitchen. A tasty looking soup simmered gently within a pot.

“We settled for something simple,” Nanette, standing on a stepping stool, said with a hint of dissatisfaction.

Well, it’s good that she’s honest with herself, Willem thought and gave her a pat on the head.

Nephren, who was skillfully cutting up a chunk of mutton beside Nanette, turned around. “How’s Almaria?”

“She doesn’t look too bad, but I made her sleep some more just in case.”

“… worried?”

“Of course I am.”

“Even if this is just a dream?”

“Even if this is just a dream,” Willem answered without hesitation.

“I see.” Nephren turned back around towards the chunk of meat. “I think that’s for the best. It

wouldn't be fitting for you to search for a reason not to help her. But…"

"But what?"

"If I troubled you, then I'm sorry."

"Don't be silly." With a slight wave of his hand, Willem left the kitchen.

"A lover's quarrel?" he heard Nanette ask. *Who taught you that word…*

"When you finish, bring some to Aly. She's probably hungry."

"Oookay!" Nanette responded enthusiastically in her high pitched voice.

By the time the soup was ready, Almaria still didn't wake up. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, so they left her alone.

The next morning, at breakfast time, Almaria still didn't wake up.

No matter how much they called to her.

Or shook her.

Or slapped her cheeks.

Or yelled her name.

She showed no signs of opening her eyes.

Part 4: Anthem of the Homeland

The night watch room, Gomag Public Treatment Facility.

“Oh yeah, have you heard the rumors about the singing?” A doctor wearing a worn out white coat asked as he shuffled a deck of cards. “I heard a little of the voice. It felt kind of… nostalgic in a way. The feeling you get when you hear an old song for the first time in a while.”

“Then it’s gotta be someone nearby humming. Probably went to school with you or something,” another doctor said as he threw a card on the table. “Personally, I don’t like these rumors of ghosts so close to these patients. Even though they don’t wake up, they’re still alive. One ‘tank’.”

“It’s not that big of a deal yet. Two ‘knights’.”

“That means it’s just a matter a time. One ‘aristocrat’ and one ‘servant’.”

Cards piled up on the table. One of the doctors cursed under his breath with a scowl and tossed in a coin.

“Do you think they’ll recover? The patients.”

“I doubt it. There’s something strange about them. Usually, people in comas that long show signs of deterioration and their bodies get dirty, but those patients don’t exhibit any of those symptoms at all.”

One of them had a sudden realization. “… aren’t the adventurers out on patrol a little late?”

Heavy security had been placed around the building in anticipation of an attack by a dangerous group. Adventurers patrolled the areas in shifts and checked in at the watch room every thirty minutes. The doctor looked at the clock. Almost a whole hour had passed since they last showed up.

“Who knows? Maybe they got diarrhea or something. Anyways, next game.”

“No, if they had diarrhea, you’d think they’d at least come get some medicine.”

“Whatever, just deal the cards. I need to get my revenge.”

The doctor, who had half stood up out of his chair, sat back down with a sigh.

Meanwhile, a group of adventurers, including a certain woman in red leather armor, lay collapsed on the ground outside in a patch of darkness, out of reach of the moon and the watchfires’ illumination. None of them bore even a single external scratch, yet none of them retained even a sliver of consciousness.

Also at the same time, a group of men, all wrapped in dark cloaks which blended in with the night, silently infiltrated the hospital ward.

Wait. Without a sound, one of the invaders signaled to his comrades using lip movements and hand signs. *There might be someone hiding*.

Why do you think that?

I hear singing.

The men listened carefully.

I hear it. But, I don't think it'll be an obstacle to our mission.

I agree. We don't have much time. Let's hurry.

The man who first stopped them thought for a bit, then nodded slightly.

They dashed through the darkness, unlocked the door to the patient's room, slid inside, walked up to a particular bed, and confirmed the face of the sleeping middle aged man.

There's no doubt. This is the first target, Odle N Gracis.

The men took out a black body bag and spread it out. Just as one of them lifted the patient up and was about to stuff him in the bag–

Odle opened his eyes.

"Eh?" A startled voice slipped out of the man carrying him.

With a loud thump, Odle's body dropped to the ground.

What are you doing!?

Sensing an emergency situation, the other men entered a cautious stance. Before their eyes, their comrade who had been carrying Odle's body now lay collapsed on the floor. A puddle of dark red liquid seeped out of his body. The smell of iron began to waft throughout the room.

Odle stood up. He stared straight at the men with his bloodshot eyes. Then, with his mouth stretched open as wide as it could go, he started to project an inaudible voice.

He's... singing?

Odle's body shook back and forth as his mouth continued to move.

These unexpected developments were not enough to faze the intruders. They had a mission they needed to carry out silently, and just a little noise had mixed in. But no one in the hospital seemed to have noticed yet. Even if their target showed resistance, their job remained the same. Perhaps

they would need to get a little rough, but that was it.

However.

They saw it.

That strange sight which suddenly seemed to cover their entire field of vision.

That ashen plain.

Devoid of humans, devoid of towns and cities, a world in which only the sun and moon circulated around and around, giving birth to an endless cycle of day and night.

At that strange and foreign scene, for some reason, the men felt a powerful surge of nostalgia. An inexplicable, overwhelming sense of homesickness came over them and strained their hearts.

“Wha…”

Amidst the confusion, they only just realized: they couldn’t move. They had lost the power to even lift their tongues, much less move an arm or leg.

Not only could they no longer tackle the slowly

approaching Odle, they could no longer even dodge to defend themselves. They couldn't even scream in terror.

Odle continued to sing in that voice which didn't even register as sound.

Then, one after the other, the intruders collapsed to the floor with a thud.

Streams of dark red poured out from their bodies, tainting the neatly cleaned hospital room.

Part 5: The Beginning of the End

Willem had a few questions he wanted to ask Navrutri. How were his efforts to prevent the impending doomsday coming along? Could they really protect the world at this rate? Did he find a way to wake up all the people in comas?

However, on the way to the Guild, Willem realized that he didn't even know where to find Navrutri. If he looked hard enough he could probably find him eventually, but that would take time, and Willem wasn't exactly in the mood for a leisurely game of hide and seek.

Could Navrutri be using True World's research facility as his hideout? If so, finding him would be quite difficult. Despite the relatively small size of Gomag, the adventurers still hadn't managed to find anything. The base had to either be camouflaged extremely well, or perhaps hidden underground.

Underground. *That's it!* Willem had completely

forgotten. There was one place. An underground facility of unknown origin lying secretly beneath the city. He knew its general location. No proof of any connection between that place and True World existed anywhere, but taking a look could be worth it.

... this isn't reality. This is a spiritual prison. An arbitrarily manufactured dream world.

The only reason this town and these people seem so realistic is to enhance the prison.

Nothing here has worth. No, I must not see worth in anything. That would mean weakening my will to escape to reality. That would be taking one step towards becoming a permanent inmate of this prison.

When we escape, this world and everything in it will disappear. So no matter what happens to these people, it doesn't matter to me. I accepted that from the start. Or at least I should have.

That Almaria isn't real. I was going to end up abandoning her soon anyways. It didn't matter when I

lost her. None of this matters.

Willem desperately tried to convince himself time and time again, but it never worked.

Who cares if she's fake or real? It's Almaria. She called me father. She asked me to stay by her side. She laughed in front of me. She cried. Got mad. Disgusted. She sulked. Acted spoiled. She showed me her face. That face I should have never been able to see again. She let me hear her voice. Isn't it obvious that I wouldn't want to lose her again?

"Willem." A voice interrupted his thoughts.

Looking down, he noticed for the first time that Nephren was walking alongside him. His inner debate had blinded him that much. He also noticed the snowflakes starting to accumulate on the ground.

"... sorry. Was I making a scary face or something?"
Willem took a deep breath, then let it out.

"You were. But that's not it. Something feels strange."

Willem took a look around, but didn't see anything particularly out of the ordinary. He saw a gently sloping path and short staircases connecting it to various other sidewalks. He smelled the scent of spices characteristic to the residential areas in the evening. On the roads, the usual bustling crowds of people hurrying home were — what?

He spotted a few people standing on the roadside. Just standing, as if rooted in place. They vaguely gazed off in various directions: the sky, the ground, the road ahead. But their eyes seemed to lack focus, almost as if they were… soulless.

"… it can't be."

Willem ran up to a nearby woman who looked to be on her way home from shopping. She was simply standing frozen in place, with a basket of meat and vegetables still in her hand. The woman didn't seem to be unconscious exactly, but it looked as if she completely forgot who she was and what she was doing, leaving her in a state of blankness.

Willem tried talking to the woman. He wove his

hands about in front of her face. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her violently. No matter what he tried, the woman showed absolutely no response. Except, her lips were moving ever so slightly, as if whispering, or perhaps singing, something. Yet, even if Willem strained to listen, he couldn't pick up a sound.

"Ren."

"Nn."

Just by having her name called, Nephren understood Willem's orders and began to move. She went around to all the others in the area, checking their conditions one by one. During that time, Willem quickly ignited his Venom, then, with such force that his shoes left a deep imprint on the hardened ground, he leaped into the sky. As he reached an altitude many times higher than the surrounding houses, he surveyed the area.

This is bad...

Fires had sprung up in a few places throughout the

city. He could also hear voices of distress and confusion riding towards him on the wind.

“Has it begun?”

This is real bad. The chaos, whatever it was, had already spread widely, and only continued to advance with each passing second.

“Willem.” Nephren came running back. “They’re all the same. They don’t respond no matter what I do. The people moving around are normal. But they’re starting to realize that something’s happening.”

From what he saw, Willem roughly estimated the percentage of citizens already in that dazed state to be a little less than twenty. However, the remaining eighty percent was rapidly losing their composure at the eeriness of seeing the people around them suddenly cease all movement.

“Some kind of rapidly spreading poison?

No. This is beyond that. It has to be that faction of True World opposing Navrutri. They must have completed their technology to spread a curse widely and

indiscriminately. But still... something's off.

Willem couldn't explain it very well, but he suddenly felt a certain unnaturalness in the situation unfolding before their eyes.

"Let's head back to the orphanage for the time being. I'm worried about Aly and the oth–"

An agonizing scream suddenly pierced the air.

Willem turned around.

The woman from earlier had moved. She was now sinking her teeth into the shoulder of a man, probably a relative, who had approached her. Blood spurted out. The woman's teeth, too weak for the flesh they were trying to rip apart, started to fall out. With pure fear and insanity carved into his face, the man thrust the woman's body away, causing her to lose balance and collapse onto the ground.

Then, the woman slowly stood up again. In her blood stained mouth, where her teeth used to be, *something else* had begun to grow in. They looked

almost like bluish purple... tentacles.

“Grab every remaining normal person and evacuate to the orphanage!” Willem screamed as he took off running.

He slammed both palms straight into the stomach of the woman, or rather the grotesque thing which used to be a woman, which was trying to assault the man again. Bear Palm, a technique he learned from Hilgram himself. The impact hardly damaged the victim’s body at all; instead, all the force went to sending the receiver flying backwards.

“What!?” The moment his hands made contact, Willem noticed something strange. The woman’s body felt heavy and tough, almost like a chunk of lead. “Are you okay?!”

Ignoring the pain in his wrists, Willem turned to face the man. The woman’s bite must have severed a large artery: blood gushed rapidly out of his shoulder. If they didn’t stop the bleeding immediately, it would be too late. Willem tore off a bit of his sleeve in a panic and ran over.

“A song…” the man murmured. “I hear… a song…” His eyes began to lose focus and stare blankly into the void. “An ashen world… how… nostalgic…”

Sensing the change in the man’s condition, Willem backed away. *This is bad*. The blood streaming from the man’s shoulder began to bubble furiously. As with the woman, bluish purple *things* were beginning to grow out of his wound. The man was becoming unhuman before Willem’s eyes.

However, it didn’t surprise Willem one bit. He accepted the transformation occurring in the once fellow Emnetwyte with ease. A human becoming unhuman. The hypothesis which he never wanted to believe was proved right in front of him.

“… no…” Nephren mumbled in shock. “This…”

Nephren must have reached the same conclusion as Willem. After all, she had spent years fighting them up in the sky. Her entire life had been created for the sole purpose of dying in battle with them. Therefore, there was no way she wouldn’t be able to tell. She recognized it immediately, and murmured

that name.

"... Aurora... Piercing and Penetrating Second Beast..."

Desperatio, the kinslayer. A Kaliyon which existed for the sole purpose of helping humans slay other humans. The same sword with which Noft Kei Desperatio fought the 17 Beasts. That discovery lead Willem to a certain hypothesis: that the Beasts were no more than remodeled humans.

And now, in a dream resembling the past, he had gotten his proof.

As for the rest of the story, he already knew how it would play out.

Just like the legends told, the Emnetwyte would release, or rather transform into, the Beasts, then rain destruction upon the world.

Overall, its body had the shape of a string. If Willem had to make a comparison, a large snake would probably be the most fitting description.

However, needless to say, it was no snake. Headless and tailless, the creature had countless needles growing out of its body in place of scales. The needles could extend and contract freely, sometimes acting as cilia which propelled the creature through the air, and sometimes acting as razor sharp spears which pierced its prey.

The Aurora, Piercing and Penetrating Second Beast. They were one of the most commonly encountered Beasts on land, but also known as one of the least dangerous, due to their inability to kill more than one person at a time. If a group of three came across an Aurora, at least one or two were almost guaranteed to escape with their lives. None of the other sixteen Beasts were so merciful.

As they hurried towards the orphanage, Willem and Nephren gathered as many still unaffected people as they could. At first, it went well. People responded to their calls and joined them. A few tried to attack them, but none proved to be threats.

When their group grew to around twenty people or

so, however, things started to go awry. One of the safe people amongst them, a young boy, suddenly started lashing out at those around him. He had transformed, but still only had the strength of the small child he used to be, so they easily suppressed him. The problem came after that. The fear of knowing that anyone could transform and start attacking his neighbors at any instant tore their group apart from within. Ignoring Willem's attempts to calm them down, the twenty or so people all scattered.

When they finally reached the orphanage, they found it empty.

No Almaria, who should have been sleeping in her bed.

No children, who should have been locked up safely in their rooms.

Willem and Nephren's calls received no responses. They checked every room and every closet to no avail. In the short time that they had been away, everyone had disappeared off somewhere. Willem

touched Almaria's mattress, but couldn't feel even a single drop of warmth, as if no one had ever lay there.

"... haha." Willem's body suddenly went limp, and he barely prevented himself from collapsing to the ground. "I see. Whoever made this dream must be a devil after all. I'm betting it's either an Aeshma or Bufas. They're finally interfering, trying to break our will..."

"Willem," Nephren said in a censuring tone.

"... I know. I won't look away from reality."

He checked every door and window, but none of them showed any signs of having been opened. Almaria and the children neither left by themselves nor got taken away by some intruder. Theoretically, a kidnapper might have expertly erased all traces of their movements, but there would be no good reason to do that.

No, this disappearance had no explanation in such ordinary terms. The creator of the dream world had

at long last directly interfered after keeping so close to reality the entire time. Their goal was to convert Willem and Nephren into permanent residents of this world, so they would need to start rewriting history before the Beasts appeared and killed their prey. Willem's prediction turned out to be correct.

"If only this Aly turned into an Aurora… I wouldn't have minded being killed by her…"

After all, once Willem and Nephren returned to the real world, they would just die anyways. He also didn't exactly want to stay trapped in a dream world for eternity. If he could have at least died after protecting just one promise, his first promise, that promise which he never got to fulfill, it wouldn't have been so bad. He couldn't think of a better way to throw away his life.

"Oh, wait. But if I did that, it would mean leaving you behind, Ren."

"Don't worry. If you die, I'll probably just die with you anyways." Nephren softly wrapped her finger around Willem's.

"... well now I can't die, can I?" He gave Nephren's hair a ruffle like always, and, like always, she dodged his hand with an annoyed face.

Now, let's solve this mystery. What did Almaria and the children's disappearance signify? The answer would surely lead them to the last enemy they needed to overcome.

Soon after Almaria went unconscious, the town began to change. One by one, the residents of Gomag transformed into Aurora. But in the real world, Teimerre, not Aurora, reigned over the remnants of the city.

This dream world most likely held the memories of almost all, or perhaps all, of Gomag's residents. The creator of the world recreated history based off of those memories. Willem and Nephren were foreigners in this world. Their enemy was working to make them permanent residents.

Hypotheses. Wild guesses. Intuition. Things they saw. Heard. Felt. Willem stuck everything into a

great pot inside his head and stirred the jumbled mess around.

Could it be...?

Just as a conclusion started to take shape, the doorbell rang, followed by violent knocking on the front door.

“Almaria! Everyone! Are you safe!?”

“Ted?”

Suspending his train of thought, Willem looked up and muttered that name. *He was safe?* A feeling which Willem couldn’t quite call happiness welled up from within his chest.

“Falco! Wendel! Horace!” Ted desperately called out the names of the children as he furiously rang the bell and banged on the door.

“... well, I guess I shouldn’t leave him alone.”

“Nn.” With a nod, Nephren followed Willem out of the room.

“Meanae! Dettloff! Marlies! Nanette!”

Is he purposely leaving my name for last? Willem thought as he opened the door.

Ted, who had been banging the door so hard almost his entire body weight was leaning on it, barely managed to avoid tumbling forward. “Willem! You’re safe!”

“Yeah, for now at least.”

Ted must have fought his way through hell on the way to the orphanage. His ghost pale face hinted at the many horrors he no doubt laid eyes upon.

“What about Almaria and the others!? Did anything strange happen to them!?”

“Ah, well, at the very least, they haven’t broken out into rampages yet.” Willem nodded vaguely.

“Oh thank goodness…” Ted looked as if he were about to collapse.

Willem grabbed his arms to support him, and said, “Enough talk. You must be tired. Come in, I’ll make some tea.”

“Ah, before that, please take these.” Despite not even having the strength to stand on his own, Ted managed to keep up that smile of his as he held out the large leather sheath which he had been carrying on his back.

“A Kaliyon?”

“It’s only a really low rank one that hardly requires Brave qualifications. I borrowed it from the Guild because I thought it might be useful in your hands.”

Based on what Ted said, he must have stopped by the guild before coming to the orphanage. “Are the guys at the guild safe? What about Lucie!?” The question slipped out of Willem’s mouth.

“… there’s one more thing, or rather person, I want you to take care of.”

Without answering, Ted turned around. Behind him stood a young girl dressed in travel clothes who looked to be around fifteen or sixteen years old. Vivid scarlet hair flowed down her back, and eyes of the same color stared down at her feet

uncomfortably.

A strange sense of deja vu tugged at some place deep inside Willem's mind. He couldn't brush away the feeling that he had seen... or rather met the girl somewhere before. However, he couldn't recall where.

"I found her on the streets. There were many others, but she's the only one I managed to bring here safely," Ted explained. "Please help her. This is the only safe place I can think of."

"... alright, alright. Just come in. Maybe you can't tell by yourself, but you look like you're going to pass out."

"No, I'm afraid I must go now." Ted laughed.

"What are you talk–"

"I hear a song." Even as tears began to stream down his face, Ted never let that forced smile collapse. "I want to return home. I want to return home. Someone keeps whispering that inside my head. I'm starting to see ashen plains overlapping with the

scenery before my eyes. I don't have much longer."

"... Ted."

"So sorry, but I can't come in for tea. Of course, I always dreamed about becoming a dangerous man to Almaria, but not in this way. And also, I made up my mind to wait until I get permission from her beloved father. I won't let this stupid dream or song crush that determination."

"... Ted..."

"Now, I must excuse myself." Ted knocked away Willem's hands and, using every bit of strength left in his muscles, stood up on his own. "I trust you to take care of the rest." With that, Ted dashed off. Before long, his figure melted into shadow amidst the evening gloom.

Willem couldn't get the image of Ted running off into the distance out of his mind. Only now did Willem realize how great of a guy Ted was. In order to protect Almaria and a girl he didn't even know, he chose to disappear by himself as far away as

possible. He must have been tired. Scared. Lonely. Yet, up until his last moments, he never let his weak side show above his manly facade.

Please help her, Ted had requested. Willem would've liked to honor his final wish, but how, exactly, was he supposed to save anyone in a world hurdling towards the apocalypse? *I trust you to take care of the rest? You're only level 8! Why... why do you try so hard to act strong...*

The red haired girl glared at the coffee cup in front of her with a frown. Or more accurately, she glared at the dark brown liquid sitting inside it.

"Do you not like coffee?" Willem asked.

The girl shook her head, then went back to her staring contest with the mug, showing no signs of putting it to her mouth.

"Should I put some milk and sugar in it?"

The girl shook her head again. Then, she seemed to steel her resolve. With the face of a soldier marching off to her final battle, she lifted the cup

and gulped it down all at once.

“……!?!”

The girl’s face turned bright red. After returning her mug to the table, she covered her mouth with both hands and let out a silent scream. Then, she started gasping desperately, like a fish stuck on land.

“Looks like it was too hot,” Nephren said as she placed a cup of cold milk in front of the girl.

The girl hesitated for a moment, as if drinking the milk would somehow constitute defeat, but soon snatched the new cup and drained it. After regaining control of her breathing, she said, “… it was hot. And bitter.”

Well, yeah…

“Do you want more?”

“With milk this time.” The girl held out her empty cup, slightly embarrassed.

She turned out to be a rather strange girl. Willem

guessed her age to be around fifteen, same as Kutori. However, her speech and behavior gave off the impression of a much younger age, so much so that she seemed even younger than Nephren, which was pretty hard to do.

She wore traveling clothes, but her companions were nowhere in sight. She might have been travelling alone, or maybe she got separated from them. Considering the possibility that her companions might have transformed into Beasts, Willem didn't really feel like asking.

And more than anything, her staring. When her eyes weren't occupied with the coffee mug in front of her, they looked up at Willem, staring intently as if trying to peer deep inside his mind. When he showed signs of noticing, the girl grew flustered and quickly cut eye contact. The stare wasn't a friendly one, but Willem also didn't detect any hostility in it. If he had to analyze it, he would put it at a 6:4 ratio of curiosity to cautiousness.

"Is there something on my face?" he asked Nephren,

who shook her head.

Hmm… maybe I really have met her somewhere before? Willem ran through his career as a Quasi Brave in his mind but came up empty. Also, he didn't think he would forget if he ever saw someone with such vivid scarlet hair.

……

Scarlet hair. An image of Kutori floated up out of his memory. As she lost her memories, a vivid red had gradually taken over her hair. Maybe it was just due to the unstable light of the stove, but the scarlet on the girl sitting before his eyes seemed to closely resemble Kutori's red. Was that the culprit behind his feeling of deja vu?

"… u-um." The girl looked up. "You're… the real Willem, right?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah." The sudden question caught him off guard, but he managed to answer. "I don't believe I'm that famous… do you know me from somewhere?"

The girl nodded.

“Ah, did Ted tell you about me?”

The girl shook her head. “I saw you in a dream. It was kind of short, but… sort of… sweet.”

“… ha…”

What is that, some sort of new pickup line? Certainly, love forming between a man and a woman in an extreme life or death situation had been a common trope for quite some time, and they were undoubtedly in an extreme situation. But, well, considering the girl’s age, Willem couldn’t get into an even slightly romantic mood.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked.

“What?”

“Do you remember Leila?”

Of course, being a Regal Brave, Leila Asprey’s fame far surpassed Willem’s, so it made sense that the girl knew her name. However, he found it strange that the girl would suddenly bring Leila up now of

all times, and furthermore the word ‘remember’ rather than ‘know’ seemed odd.

“Sure,” he answered vaguely. “Why do you ask?”

“Because she’s an important person,” the girl answered. “Leila is my idol. She’s strong, hard working, and cool.”

Willem fought back the temptation to burst out laughing. Because she was the Regal Brave, the symbol of humanity’s struggle against the other races, the Church always glorified her deeds. She was so overwhelmingly strong that she could defeat a dragon in one blow. She was so kind and noble that she couldn’t abandon the weak and needy. She was so beautiful in her armor that hordes of Borgle would prostrate themselves before her. Etc, etc.

Of course, Willem knew the truth. She took about half a day to defeat a dragon, she wasn’t dumb enough to mess up her priorities just for some weaklings, and she only wore the Church’s armor once before yelling ‘too tight!’ and sending it back. The Leila that Willem knew was uncompromising,

blunt, wild, and, more than anything, free.

“And also brave, in the truest sense of the word.” The girl continued her praise of Leila as Willem ran through his memories. “She loved someone, but she hid it. In order to let that person be happy, she gave up on her own happiness. She went without hesitation to a battle where she knew she would die. When I saw Leila, I learned what kind of creatures humans are.”

“Oh? Well that’s good.”

The girl’s phrasing seemed a bit strange in some parts. Did she meet Leila somewhere and gossip about love or something? Leila gossiping about love… Willem almost burst out laughing again.

“I wanted to be like her. That was my last aspiration. When I died and became all scattered, I think those feelings must have remained.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ah–” As if snapping out of some stupor, the girl’s head suddenly jolted up. “Nothing. It’s nothing, so

forget what I said. But remember it just a little."

So which do you want me to do...

"... who are you?" Nephren asked. "For some reason, looking at you, I can't keep calm. It feels strange."

"... it's probably just your imagination. I think it'd be best to not think too much about it," the girl said, then gulped down the last of her coffee, which was now about 70% milk.

"Feel better now?" Willem asked.

"Yes," she replied with a nod.

"Alright. Sorry, but do you mind watching over the house for a bit?"

"Eh?" The girl looked confused.

"We have to go out for a little." Willem glanced at Nephren. "While we're gone, I want you to stay here. Can I count on you?"

"Where are you going?"

"There's someone we need to meet. We're gonna crash her place and overturn this miniature garden

while we're at it."

"Then I'll go too."

"No, it's dangerous. The orphanage is safe... well, I can't exactly say that, but it's safer at the very least. Since that brat asked me to help you, I can't expose you to danger."

"Will you come back here? Can you promise it?"

Willem and Nephren would soon depart to confront the maker of this world. They would either succeed and shatter the dream or fail and perish. Either way, they would never return. Willem would never be able to fulfill the girl's promise.

"Sorry, no can do."

At first he thought about just saying yes. After all, they would never meet the girl again, so what difference would it make? However, in the end, he couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't bring himself to repeat what he did years ago in the very same orphanage.

Willem grabbed the Kaliyon propped up against the

wall and tossed it to Nephren. Dindrane, a mass produced model. Although it sat quite a few ranks beneath Nephren's Insania, it boasted decent all around performance and stability, which earned it a high reputation among the mediocre Quasi Braves unable to wield better swords. The masterpiece of the capital's workshops.

"Should I really be the one holding this?" Nephren asked.

"I can fight a little bare handed, but you would be defenseless, right?" Willem asked, and she nodded slightly in response. "Well, then let's get going." Turning his back to the red haired girl, he walked out the door.

"Wasn't there more you wanted to talk about?" The flying fish appeared out of nowhere and coiled around the scarlet haired girl. "You finally got to meet him. You coulda flirted some more."

"No." The girl shook her head. "I'm not the one with a crush on Willem. I wouldn't like such a lame guy."

“You really are stubborn… oh well.” The fish continued to circle around the girl. “Shouldn’t you have gone with them, even if it meant revealing your identity? Our goal is almost the same as theirs. I think some cooperation would’ve benefitted us all.”

“……”

“Even if he does hate you as you keep insisting, he’s not the type to lose sight of his priorities. I think we had a fair chance at getting his help.”

“Probably.”

“Then why didn’t you ask?”

“… I don’t know.” As she spoke, the girl looked out the window towards the direction where Willem and Nephren had run off to. “When he told me I couldn’t go with them, for some reason, it made me a little happy.”

“Hmm… I see… that’s it.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Seems like something you would do, that’s all,” the fish said with a sigh. “By the way, how was your first black coffee?”

“Hot,” the girl responded immediately.

Nephren flew through the sky with her illusory wings, while Willem hopped from rooftop to rooftop with his Venom empowered legs. Below, they could see hordes of Aurora roaming the streets.

“The creator of this world is a Beast, not a devil,” Willem said as he sent roof tiles flying. “Until just a few minutes ago, that Beast didn’t exist in this world. It was a human not yet transformed. That’s why it never interfered with us directly, and also why we couldn’t find it no matter how hard we searched.

But, this day has finally come to this world. The curse spread among the people started turning them into Beasts. That’s when the creator started to act. Almaria disappeared because the creator

needed her to."

They could hear screams from down below. People were still alive, although, soon enough, not a single one would remain.

"... I don't really understand," Nephren replied.

Willem figured as much. After all, he didn't really understand the situation too accurately himself. He was simply trying to tie together all the loose ends in his mind in a way that seemed plausible. No deep logic nor conviction supported his words.

"Well, don't worry about it for now. What's important is that this world is recreating the events that happened in reality five hundred years ago relatively faithfully. Our reality lies five hundred years in the future in this world. In other words, that which survived five hundred years in reality should be here in this world, now."

Willem landed on top of the church's spire, where he had a good view of the central plaza.

"Here?" Nephren landed next to him.

“Yeah, in terms of coordinates, it should be right here.”

“I don’t see anything.” Nephren looked around, but only saw hideous monsters roaming about. “It’s not in the middle of all those Beasts, is it?”

“Of course it is,” Willem answered.

He readied his fists… or tried to, but felt a strange resistance in his body. He knew very well what that pain signified. *The dream must be coming to an end*. In reality, he was no more than a not fully dead corpse. His bones were shattered, tendons slashed, organs dysfunctional, flesh torn to shreds, and on top of it all, his overuse of Venom had dried up his very life force. His self in the dream world had started to catch up to reality. However, he still had a little more time. After a deep breath, he readied his fists again.

“Follow me,” he said, then jumped off.

En route, he kicked off the church’s bell tower to further accelerate himself. At a speed much faster

than a natural freefall, he plummeted towards the small broken fountain in the middle of the plaza. Then, his fist struck the ground. Radiant Dragon Menace. The skill capable of producing enough destructive power to split the earth and smash a waterfall.

Above, the church bell swung back and forth due to the impact from his kick, ringing loudly each time. After a brief pause, the stove paving covering the streets fractured, then began to collapse into the depths below.

Bullseye. The mysterious facility under what used to be Gomag that he explored with Grick and Kutori. The last place in Gomag which remained unseen by the adventurers, or by anyone else, until its discovery five hundred years later by the expedition from Regul Aire.

Ouch. When used by one who lacked the proper skill to restrain the immense current of power, Radiant Dragon Menace caused a nasty backlash. The skin of his right fist had developed a vicious tear, and the

bone felt unstable. But, he could still move.

“This way!”

Leaving the approaching Aurora for Nephren to handle, Willem leapt into the darkness below.

A few problems necessarily plague underground facilities, the first being lighting, and the second being air circulation. Without sunlight, fire becomes the only other option, but too much fire makes it hard to breathe. The need for fresh air then calls for a large window, which then makes the facility easier to find. As a result, secret underground bases were never very practical.

On Regul Aire, they could just use crystal lamps…

Useless thoughts passed through Willem’s head, but, to sum things up, it was dark. Very, very dark. He also never learned any convenient night vision techniques or illumination spells. Moreover, he didn’t have much experience exploring Mazes, which the underground facility reminded him of. He may have looked cool diving in head first, but,

unfortunately, he didn't actually have much of a plan.

Beside him, Nephren ignited a small amount of Venom and passed it through Dindrane, causing the fissures in the blade to glow faintly. "Should I make it stronger?"

"No, this is enough."

The mighty Kaliyon, humanity's last hope for salvation, being used as a torch. Willem now realized they should've just brought an actual torch, but he hadn't been thinking about the small details earlier. If Grick were with them, he would definitely be mocking Willem.

He pushed open a nearby door and took a look around in the dim light. To put it simply, it was a messy room. Chaotic mountains of paper buried every desk, every shelf, and practically every empty spot on the floor. The countless documents, which included research reports and scribbled memos, seemed to overwhelmingly assert their presence.

Reminds me of a certain reference room, Willem thought.

He tried searching for another path forward to no avail. If necessary, he could force their way forward by smashing another floor or wall or something. However, Aurora could be lurking anywhere, and his right hand still hurt, so doing so would incur great risks.

"… this…" Nephren picked up one of the pieces of paper. "Research material?"

"It's probably about how to make the curse that turns humans into Beasts, right?"

"Nn… I don't think so."

Hearing Nephren's doubtful response, Willem took the paper. *Geez, get better handwriting*. "… what are the Visitors?"

Huh? Obviously, the Visitors were the Visitors, simple as that. Long long ago, they filled the great emptiness by creating the world. They spread lush green across the land, filled the oceans with water,

and gave birth to the humans and other races. Then, they split their souls amongst the humans and disappeared.

Just the other day, the last surviving Visitor suddenly awoke and, for some reason, became hostile towards humanity, along with her subordinates, the Poteau. Willem and the others managed to defeat them after much sacrifice, then this and that happened until the present.

"The Visitors did not create the world. They merely altered it." *Oh? Well, that's religious cults for ya.* "This world already existed before they visited. Beings, while not exactly living, existed. But when the Visitors came, they did not like what they saw. So they cursed the world and everything within it."

Wait wait wait. I've never heard this before.

"... Willem?" Nephren asked.

"It's nothing." He tossed the memo aside. "A theologist might get a laugh out of it, but it doesn't have anything to do with us right now."

As he looked around at the mountains of paper once more, the clash of a sword suddenly reached his ears.

“Willem.”

“I heard it.”

It didn’t come from that far away. He could clearly nail down the direction of the source. At the very least, someone was there. And more than likely, *something* was there too. They dashed out of the room and into the darkness once again.

Nephren’s widely spread wings provided enough illumination to safely sprint down the hallways. Along the way, they spotted numerous signs which said ‘no graffiti!’ stuck onto the walls. They appeared to be ineffective, however, as equations, curses, and all sorts of other ominous writing buried the blank spaces in between them.

Humans grew too much. The initial curse will reach its limit.

The Emnetwyte should not have come into existence.

Their creation was the first and greatest mistake of the Visitors.

Willem briefly glanced at some of the words as they dashed by.

Visitors! Why did you create the humans?

Look at what your homesickness has brought upon this land! Look what it has stolen!

Screams of agony written in sloppy handwriting lined the walls.

The first thing they noticed were mountains of Aurora, or, more accurately, mountains of severed Aurora corpses. Next, they saw Navrutri sitting with his back against the wall nearby.

“Hey…” Navrutri, who probably sensed the light approaching, looked up. His same old smile spread across his face, but this time it carried none of its usual liveliness. “I was wondering who was coming. How’d you find this place, Willem?”

A deep red stained Navrutri’s entire body below his

chest. The flesh on his stomach had become no more than a gruesome clump of blood and guts, likely as a result of being mutilated and pierced by countless needles. He clearly didn't have much longer.

Willem guessed that his Kaliyon, Lapidem Sybilus, was the only thing keeping him conscious. The elite class Kaliyons all had their own specialized Talents; Lapidem had the ability to forcefully maintain its user's mental and physical condition as long as it stayed activated. However, it couldn't clog up opened wounds or stop bleeding. It could do nothing in the face of inevitable death.

"The old curse faded. We needed to curse humanity once more. But we couldn't. We obtained the corpse of a god. We smashed her soul to pieces. But still, we couldn't recreate the Visitors' curse."

"Oi… Navrutri!?"

Lapidem Sybilus' light began to fade. Navrutri's Venom had begun to wane.

"We can't do it by ourselves… we need… the

wisdom… of the ‘Foreigner’…”

His eyes no longer looked towards Willem. Their gaze became fixed on some faraway place.

“But… we’re out… of time…”

The hand which Navrutri had held out dropped to the ground. His bearded face, that face which always carried his signature jokester smile, twisted into an expression of pain and suffering before stiffening.

“What are you saying all of a sudden? I don’t get it…” Unable to control his emotions, Willem started hurling insults at that lifeless body. “What are you doing!? You can’t die now! You can’t fail now! If you wanted to save us, finish the job! You’re a Brave, aren’t you!? That’s your duty!”

“Willem.”

He clenched his fists. He wanted to give Navrutri one last good punch, but, after raising his arm, he gave up. Instead, he picked up Lapidem Sybilus.

“Whatever battle you guys were fighting, it doesn’t

matter anymore. The outcome was decided five hundred years ago, and we can't do anything to change that. But..."

Willem ignited his Venom. The high class Lapidem Sybilus didn't accept him. The cracks along its blade opened ever so slightly, and light streamed out, but nothing more. In his hands, it was no more than a big, glowing sword, not a Kaliyon forged to help humanity stand against enemies who far surpassed them.

"Should I wield it?" Nephren asked.

Willem shook his head, then turned to face the path ahead.

Amongst the enveloping darkness of the underground facility, he saw faint rays of light pouring out from the next door.

Part 6: Before This World Ends – C

In the middle of the wide, undecorated room stood a faintly glowing crystal pillar. Within the pillar were countless faces, each with its own expression: lament, joy, sorrow, surprise, tranquility, bewilderment, rage, fear. But while they displayed different emotions, their mouths all sang in unison. Finally, about halfway up the pillar, there protruded a crystal statue in the shape of the upper half of a young girl's body, almost like an intricate figurehead placed on the bow of a ship.

"… Shiantor, Lamenting First Beast…?" Nephren uttered its name.

Willem had heard of it before. Hardly anything was known about it, despite the passage of over five hundred years since its initial appearance. No one even knew exactly how much of a threat it posed. The mysterious First Beast. The first *someone*, a former human, who transformed into a Beast.

Willem took a step towards it. Intense pain, as if he were being split apart, shot throughout his entire body. In fact, in some places his skin had actually begun to split apart. He again remembered the miserable condition his body had been in right before getting trapped in the dream.

It was a happy dream, but this is the end.

In the real world as well, she most likely transformed into a Beast in this room, not back at the orphanage. That explained why she disappeared from her bed.

"… stay back, Ren. If you get close, your Venom will run berserk and you'll die," he said, then took another step closer.

Some organ or other part inside him collapsed. He forced the chunk of blood trying to launch out of his mouth back down to his stomach. A single drop of scarlet fell from the corner of his lips.

I'm fine. No, I'm not fine at all, but at the very least, I can still walk. I can still get closer.

Willem should have realized sooner. No doubt, he would have noticed if he had thought for just a little bit. The entire time, from his awakening in this world up until the present, she never mentioned one word about their promise. She never said 'welcome home' to him, not even once.

"Hey, Almaria."

Willem's call received no response. He took another step forward. Fissures broke out in every bone of his body. Still, using Lapidem Sybilus as a walking stick, he managed to prop up his collapsing skeleton.

"Neither of us ever mentioned the butter cake."

Willem never brought it up because he knew this world was fake. He knew that he hadn't returned home; he was merely trapped. That thought prevented him from ever talking about their promise.

But what about Almaria? Willem's return should have seemed genuine to her, who didn't know

anything about their external circumstances. It should have looked like Willem kept his promise, yet she never said anything about it.

Only one explanation could solve this contradiction. Maybe she had never been fully aware of it, but, unconsciously, she had realized: Almaria Duffner still hadn't truly welcomed her 'father' home.

... father...

The crystal girl called to him in a soundless voice. However, Willem could hear it loud and clear.

"Geez, how long do you plan on waiting?" A bitter smile spread across his face. "You became a Beast before anyone else, so you dragged thousands of others into this dream, preserving Gomag as it was right before the end inside you? For five hundred years, you carried this illusion, cherished it, and waited, never giving up?"

Another step forward. Some other part of him broke down. He couldn't tell where anymore. Searing pain had already enveloped every inch of his body.

“You waited all that time… in the hopes that I would one day stumble into this world?”

Such an unrealistic wish should never have come true. Even after thousands of eons, that hope should have never taken one step towards realization. Yet, she held it the entire time and sang all by herself. In her miniature garden sowed from the seeds of three thousand dreams, she simply sang and sang, like a broken music box.

“I’m really… really sorry, Almaria.”

One more step. Willem now stood in arm’s reach of her.

He just had to say ‘I’m back’, and her wish would come true. His promise to return home would be fulfilled in this miniature garden. On his next birthday, she would bake him the best butter cake ever. She would make him eat until he cried from heartburn. With just two words, he could realize that happy illusion.

Willem raised his right hand, which gripped

Lapidem Sybilus' hilt.

"Start maintenance!!"

The spell lines binding the Kaliyon together loosened, and the thirty five Talismans constituting Lapidem Sybilus burst apart, scattering about Willem's surroundings. With his left hand, he grabbed the pendant hanging by his chest, the language Talisman, and ripped it off its chain. He had never been able to remove it in this dream world, but it now sat cleanly on his palm, shining brilliantly. Then, he pushed it into the blade, as Lapidem's thirty sixth piece.

Within a single Kaliyon, the power of many Talismans mixed and interfered with each other in intricate ways to produce the resulting phenomena. If that delicate balanced shifted ever so slightly, the whole system collapsed. Accordingly, maintenance usually got left to the highly trained and skilled engineers in workshops with the proper equipment.

Lapidem Sybilus' spinal circuit suddenly ruptured,

severing almost half of the spell lines with it. Willem didn't mind. If he could just force the remaining lines together and preserve a minimal amount of functioning, that would be enough. With a tap of the core crystal, he released the sword from maintenance mode. The thirty five original Talismans all attempted to fit back into their usual positions, resulting in an awkward stick shape.

Then, he held up the sword, that clumsy amalgam of a sword with the power to protect the mind and a Talisman with the power to connect minds, and thrust it straight into the heart of the crystal statue.

Ah.

The song stopped.

Willem smiled softly.

"Sorry," he whispered gently. "I couldn't keep my promise."

A large fissure appeared in the crystal and soon spread throughout the entire pillar. Then, with the sound of myriad ringing bells, the Shiantor

collapsed. Just before it fully crumbled and disappeared for good, the mouth of the crystal statue girl curled into a faint smile, the smile of a saint forgiving a sinner, the smile of a daughter being spoiled by her father.

The earth shook.

The ceiling, the walls, the floor, it all began to collapse at once.

Willem, who no longer had enough strength left in him to even stand, fell helplessly along with the rubble into the depths below. A floating sensation enveloped his entire body. His sense of time blurred.

A loud singing voice seemed to reverberate directly in his head.

His field of vision became dyed ashen gray.

What!?

The sudden changes took him by surprise, but he soon understood their meaning. He now heard the

same song which the residents of Gomag heard. He saw the same scenery that they saw in their dreams.

The impulse to transform into a Beast which lay at the root of the human race. A mass of regret wild as a raging storm. The power to cut off that beloved, lost past from reality and create a dream world. The firm delusion that holing up in that world would one day solve those regrets. That bundle of emotions was the true nature of the Shiantor. And now, having lost Almaria as its vessel, it had entered the closest person, the last human remaining on the vast earth.

"Ah… I see…" *Of course. Humans can transform into Beasts.* "I guess I'm no exception…"

It was nothing to be surprised about. In fact, it was the obvious conclusion.

I wonder what kind of Beast I'll turn into.

Which of the seventeen symbols of destruction will I become?

Perhaps it didn't matter what he turned into.

Nephren was right there, Kaliyon in hand. Even if Willem transformed into a monster that could bare its fangs against the residents of Regul Aire, Nephren would kill him right away. He could accept his end with reassurance.

“Willem!!”

He felt something warm latch onto him. Opening his eyes and swatting away the ashen blanket, he saw Nephren embracing his blood drenched body.

“… Ren!?”

Some sinister substance flowed out of the Shiantor’s corpse and into Willem’s body, slipping through his many open wounds. And now, it also began to flow into Nephren’s wounded body. Willem could no longer form coherent words, but Nephren seemed to understand his question.

She slightly opened her tightly shut eyes and looked straight at his face. “Almaria asked me to!” she screamed back. “She said, knowing father, he’ll probably leave and go off somewhere again soon

enough. When that time comes, I'll have no choice but to entrust him to you!"

The song echoing in Willem's head grew softer. But that only meant it was growing stronger within Nephren.

"She said, only you'll be able to take care of our pitiful, broken down father!"

What are you talking about? Since when did you two become so close?

"That's why... that's why..."

The song reverberated loudly in both their minds.

Nephren shut her eyes tightly once again.

Ah, damn it. Why are my daughters all so kind and strong...

Aiseia. Tiat. Lantolq. Noft. All the fairies' faces popped up in his mind one by one. *Collon. Panival. Lakish... they're gonna grow up soon...*

His mouth slightly twisted upwards at the surging nostalgia.

It might be a bit of a hassle... but I'm counting on you guys to deal with us.

Clutching that warm feeling in his chest with the last of his remaining strength, Willem quietly closed his eyes.

Part 7: The Scarlet Haired Girl

A single young girl remained trapped within a massive block of ice. She had long, scarlet hair and a gentle expression on her face. By her chest, a deep sword wound gaped open. But even with such a fatal wound, the corpse of the child continued to sleep peacefully with a soft smile spread across its lips.

"... found it."

Another young girl with the same scarlet hair appeared out of the darkness and drew closer.

"Whew! That was close!" Floating in front of the girl, a flying fish flapped its fins. "We're almost out of time. If we were just a little slower, we wouldn't have made it."

"But we made it, so there's no problem."

"We can't relax yet."

"I know."

The girl touched the chunk of ice, causing a ripple to spread throughout its solid interior. Then, with a loud splash, it all instantly melted into a massive deluge of water and rapidly filled the room.

“Oof.”

The girl, now completely soaked, shut her eyes and tried to shake some of the moisture off. In front of her, the corpse of the young child fell to the ground.

“Oh my, look at that wound. Who would do such a thing to a little girl? Look, her pretty skin’s all ruined.” the fish said.

“She’s dead, so there’s no use worrying about her skin,” the girl replied bluntly.

“That may be true for mortals, but immortals can’t afford to throw away their beauty for something as small as death.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying. I don’t care either.” The girl walked towards the corpse, making a little splash with each step. Then, she stretched out her arms and picked it up. “Cold.”

“Well, it’s been sitting in ice for so long.”

The girl traced her finger over the gaping wound. “There’s a really complicated curse cast on it.”

“Of course. After all, the wound was made by that elite holy sword, Seniolis. The ultimate weapon of humanity, capable of killing the unkillable. No one, not even the Visitors, can escape that power to convert anyone it wounds into a mortal.”

“Can we revive this?”

“Well, we probably can’t do anything about this curse. It’s a little advanced for me. Once we escape, let’s look for Ebon Candle and make him do something about it.”

The girl gently lifted up the corpses’ bangs. “She’s smiling.”

“Mhm. I wonder if she’s having a nice dream.”

“She is. She had lots of dreams. Happy dreams, sad dreams. They were all short, but all precious.”

“Leila, was it? The one she aspired to be like. Did she

ever reach that goal?"

"I wonder… not really sure."

Like sand blowing away in the wind, the surrounding darkness began to rapidly collapse and disappear. The long dream was coming to an end.

"Don't let go of her, okay? If the connection is cut, it's all over," the fish warned.

"I know." The girl tightly embraced the corpse. "It's been awhile, me," she whispered softly. "It's time to wake up now."

Chapter 5: What Are You Doing at the End?



Aiseia Myse Valgalis is quite a suspicious girl. She always uses that artificial sounding laugh to hide her true emotions. When her friends get hurt, or even when she loses them for good, she never removes that vague mask of a smile.

As a result, many of the little ones who don't know her very well mistake her to be cold hearted. Because she keeps smiling no matter what happens, they get the impression that she doesn't really care about anyone other than herself.

Now, that Aiseia was in the reading room, doing some research. She pulled thick books off of the shelves, spread them out on the desk, flipped through their pages, hung her head, muttered 'nope', then put them back.

"I knew from the start, but the stuff you can learn from these really is limited," she said with a sigh.

"Do you want to know something that you can't learn here?" Lantolq suddenly said from behind, causing Aiseia to jump up with a scream. "Theology books? You don't seem like the type to read those."

"W-W-What are you doing here Lan? Don't surprise me from behind like that!"

"How am I supposed to come from the front when you have your face down on a desk? … you seem

pretty into this research."

"Ah, haha, it kinda feels like I'm not getting anywhere though." Aiseia said with a chuckle as she scratched the back of her head.

"... my room is right next to yours."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that's true."

"I admire your strength to never cry in front of others, but, if you're going to do it in your room, please keep it down a little. These walls are pretty thin, so I can hear."

"Seriously!?" Aiseia seemed genuinely panicked, a sight that Lantolq hadn't seen in awhile. "Uh... ah, I'll be careful from now on, so I'd appreciate it if you could forget you ever heard anything..."

"I wasn't going to tell anyone anyways. I won't let all that effort you put into your laugh mask go to waste."

Kutori and Nephren.

A little more than half a month had passed since

they lost two comrades — no, two friends. They all knew it was about time to get over it already. They knew, but doing so proved to be rather difficult.

Also, Lantolq heard that up until just recently, a man named Willem Kumesh had lived in the warehouse too. Just walking around, she found traces of him everywhere, whether she wanted to or not. A hanger for a male army uniform. A razor for shaving facial hair. Large boots. Bottles of spices. A few new bullet points had been added to the list of bathing rules. At the bottom of the cafeteria's menu, a new 'Today's Dessert' item had been added, then crossed out.

The fairy warehouse was their home. The place where they belonged. Their effective birthplace. Yet, in the short two months that they had been gone, a complete stranger had come in and transformed this precious place. Why did they have to endure feelings of alienation and discomfort in the sole place in the world which gave them peace and nostalgia?

Lantolq couldn't accept it. That man was their enemy all along.

"You met and talked with him, didn't you?" Aiseia asked. "You should've been able to tell what kind of person he is. He can't hide anything to save his life."

"Unfortunately, I only saw the skilled and devotional sides of him." Lantolq shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't draw conclusions on such prejudiced information."

"You really are a bother... well, I always knew that."

Shut up.

"The best ones always die first. That's what Grick said," Noft said, taking her hands off of the old piano in front of her.

Since Kutori took Desperatio down with her, Noft was now temporarily a swordless fairy. Also, on a maybe unrelated note, ever since that day half a month ago, she hadn't cut her hair. It was slowly beginning to catch up with the other girls'.

“So I’m sure that Emnetwyte must have been a good guy.”

“That logic is full of holes, but, considering that Aiseia and I are the only compatible users left, it’s rather persuasive,” Lantolq said.

“Hey, count Tiat too.”

“… oh, that’s right.”

To be honest, Lantolq only ever saw Tiat as a little fairy who never did anything but chase after Kutori. She never even thought about the fact that Tiat would one day fight alongside them. But, in the end, that’s life. Time never stops moving along, and nothing ever stops changing. Those who stand still either get left behind or pushed along by the ever flowing current.

“And also, I’m not done yet either. My life was saved, and I’m not going to let it go to waste,” Noft said as she began to play another song.

A cheerful and slightly fast tempo melody sounded forth from the piano. Did the song reflect Noft’s

mood? Or did she choose it to try to make Lantolq feel better?

"It seems like giving up on the past and living a new life would be a lot easier," Lantolq mumbled, then lay her head down on a desk and enjoyed the comfortable music.

On a vast, ashen plain, Willem opened his eyes.

"... uuh..."

He quickly closed them again. His senses felt off. He couldn't see properly. Nor could he hear, feel, or do anything else properly. It was almost like his body had been transformed into a completely different creature. His senses and consciousness didn't seem to be working with each other very well. The uncomfort almost made him want to puke.

... no, not 'almost like'. I was transformed.

Somewhere deep inside his mind, a flame like object burned continually. It was rage. It was hatred. A mysterious and terrifying urge to decimate anything filled with the despicable force known as

life.

Ah, so this is what the Beasts carry. He now understood why they destroyed the world.

There were still people not yet slaughtered, things not yet smashed to smithereens. That very fact occupied the forefront of his mind as an unforgivable sin. They were nothing more than specks of filth on the great ashen mother earth. They could not be allowed to exist. They needed to be cleansed.

This impulse was no doubt carved somewhere deep within his being. If he wanted to resist, the only way would be to trap himself in a dream.

Slowly, he opened his eyes once again.

He stood up.

The plains of beautiful ashen sand spread out forever and ever under the starry sky.

At the same time, feelings of joy and serenity at finally returning home spread out from his heart.

Shrouded in the darkness of night, surrounded by vast stretches of gray, a Beast emitted its first cry.

Credits

Shuumatsu Nani Shitemasu ka? Isogashii desu ka? Sukutte Moratte Ii desu ka? - Volume 4

Author: Kareno Akira.

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